

Communication and Materiality

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Communication and Materiality

Written and Unwritten Communication
in Pre-Modern Societies

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Einbandabbildung: Aqa Riza (Riza 'Abbasi), Young Man in a Blue Cloak, c. 1587, Ink, color and gold on paper; image: 17,6 x 7,3 cm (6 15/16 x 2 7/8 in.), Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Sarah C. Sears Collection, 1936.27

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Introduction: Communication and Materiality—Communicative Strategies of Ruling Elites from 3000 BCE through 1500 CE*

“Communication and Materiality” reconsiders the question of literacy and communication in pre-modern societies—thereby assuming that not only the content of a specific message, but also its material form and outlook affect the way in which texts can be understood and interpreted. The volume includes examples from the ancient Orient, the ancient Mediterranean, medieval Europe and the Middle East to elucidate how communication between rulers and subordinates was conceptualized in largely illiterate pre-modern societies with regard to the materiality, performance and presence of the written word. The materiality of the message here includes all visual features that can manipulate the potential beholder, such as writing surfaces, layout, iconic scripts etc. In general, to assess the importance of writing implies understanding the role of the unwritten, i.e. immaterial sphere—as in all of these societies literacy and orality are interwoven aspects of communication. Thus, apart from being materialized in tangible form, messages can be visualized (i.e. embodied) and/or auralized in public.

A common trait of all of the articles is that they deal with societies in which the performance of the (un)written word in order to communicate effectively was crucial. The material is essential for this type of communication, although the significance of performative and/or symbolic acts greatly varies in these societies—as does the extent of (il)literacy. Whereas in ancient Mesopotamia literacy was primarily confined to learned circles, literacy rates among the Arabic speaking population in medieval Cairo were relatively high. However, in both contexts the significance of publicly performed rituals in order to communicate to the population cannot be overestimated: social groups not only applied written forms of communication—they were also dependent on oral modes of expression. Thus they relied on diverse media in order “to spread the royal word” (Christina Tsouparopoulou), i.e. material as well as immaterial forms of communication.

In this sense, the picture on the front page of this volume, the “Young Man in a Blue Coat”, by Aqa Riza (16th century), alludes to the notion of the “messenger” as recently outlined by the German philosopher Sybille Krämer in her monograph on the “metaphysics of mediality”. According to Krämer, the medium of a given message—regardless of its (im)materiality—transforms the content and therefore can be com-

* This article emerged from the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies”. The CRC 933 is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

pared to the role of the messenger.¹ The messenger figures prominently at the intersection between oral and written forms of communication. He translates the written word into spoken expressions (and vice versa)—which was crucial in pre-modern societies in order to interlink and negotiate claims of different social groups. The diverse contexts depicted by our contributors notwithstanding, the volume is to be understood with regard to this common background—the entanglement of the oral and the literal.

Analysing communicative strategies of ruling elites over a period of roughly 4500 years might seem challenging at first sight—especially as the number of contributions to this volume can be classified as manageable. However, we do not aim to provide the reader with a complete handbook on said communicative strategies. Rather, by focusing on very specific contexts, we strive for a systematic and comparative analysis of communicative patterns. At the core of our approach lie two basic questions: How does communication work in mostly illiterate societies—how is it conceptualized by a given regime? And in what way does the (im)materiality of a given message affect the communicative process between senders and/or addressees?

Christina Tsouparopoulou (“Spreading the Royal Word: The (Im)Materiality of Communication in early Mesopotamia”) analyses “communicative processes employed by rulers in Mesopotamia [...] to reach both their literate and illiterate audiences and transfer their ‘knowledge’” and thereby focuses on “objects and practices in three periods in Mesopotamian history”. She describes the communicating actors as “nodes” who communicate by means of “communicative objects” as well as by “‘non-communicative’ objects”. By relying on diverse strategies such as the spoken word or purely visual means (“visual text, or else pictorial narrative” on steles), literate and non-literate audiences could be reached. Apart from more (or less) official ways to spread the royal word, Tsouparopoulou assesses the informational significance of gossiping.

Angeliki Karagianni (“Linear B Administration: The Communicative Aspects of Written Media and the Organisation of the Mycenaean Bureaucracy”) analyses macro- and micro-levels of Mycenaean Bureaucracy, with the Linear B script (2nd millennium BCE), the “earliest epigraphic attestation of the Greek language”, as their means of communication. Linear B was a script for short-term information on a very basic level with a “limited thematic coverage”, including syllabic as well as ideographic characters. Communication on the micro-level refers to internal palatial organisation; macro-level communication, by contrast, refers to wider regional or political contexts. As for the context of Linear B, “literacy [...] was apparently restricted to a small class of palace bureaucrats who used inscribed documentation very selectively and for a limited audience that included themselves and/or their close associates [...]. Writing was primarily employed for texts that served as temporary mnemonic records [...]

¹ Krämer 2008, 9–19.

rather than as self-explanatory texts for the unknowable reader". Thus, tablets often contained an "oral component of communication"; "non-textual means" and sealing techniques were more important than the written word. As it is highly probable that even administrators were not all literate, the Linear B system relies not only on ideograms, but also on specific formats that would "facilitate and enable the unambiguous interpretation of their contents by their 'handler' and/or 'readers'".

According to Lisa Wilhelmi ("Materiality and Reality of the Communication of Divine Will in the Sargonid Period"), "[...] the materiality of the communication is not static and changes character dependent on circumstances such as the sender, recipient and aim of the transmission, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the specifics of any single communicative act are influenced by the individual correspondent." In her paper, she focuses on divinatory techniques and how they were communicated to diverse social groups during the Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 911–605 BCE).

Douglas Fear ("*utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha*—Written on Clay and Parchment: Old Persian Writing and Allography in Iranian") elaborates primarily on Old Persian Cuneiform—a script that was developed for very narrow purposes during the reign of Dareios I (549–486 BCE) and "appears to have been used almost exclusively for the purpose of royal display." Old Persian cuneiform that features so prominently in the *trilingue* at Bisitūn was "[...] intended to impress, what one might almost call a 'secondary kind of iconicity'". Thus it was not meant to be read and understood semantically; rather, it should impress and corroborate the King's power.

Christoph Mauntel ("Charters, Pitchforks and green Seals. Written Documents between Text and Materiality in late Medieval Revolts") elaborates on the significance of written documents during late medieval revolts. Literacy by modern standards was "quite limited", however "written documents enjoyed an aura of credibility and reliability." Thus reports on the public destruction, seizing, and defiling of unpopular documents or the issuing of new ones are by no means seldom. Illiterates could distinguish between types of documents by their material form, i.e. their colours, seals or display type. The ability to read was therefore not necessary to comprehend symbolic acts in connection with the written word. Mauntel hereby sheds light on the performative aspects of documents: the showing of a document implies communication.

Rebecca Sauer's contribution ("The Textile Performance of the Written Word") is an analysis of communication by the textile. Unlike in medieval Europe, literacy rates were relatively high in Mamluk times (1250–1517), though this may not be true for the ruling military class of Turkish mercenaries, who were basically educated but mostly illiterate. Thus it is not surprising that colours and clothing in connection with gifting practices became inflationary for visualizing hierarchies and social bonds. Sauer focuses on the *tashrif* or *khil'a* (robe of honour inscribed with the name of the respective donor) practice as a cultural and vestimentary code that was understood by most inhabitants of Mamluk Egypt regardless of their level of literacy. Symbolically, by

giving a *khil'a*, rulers inscribe themselves onto their allies and/or subjects—the social fabric is therefore corroborated by the textile.

Most of the papers collected in this short volume are based on lectures held at the workshop “Communication and Materiality/Kommunikation und Materialität”, conducted on October 26, 2012 at Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg in collaboration with the Graduate School (Integriertes Graduiertenkolleg) of the CRC 933 “Material Text Cultures” under the auspices of Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). We would like to thank all of the participants for their discussions and the Graduate School (namely Danijel Cubelic) for administrative support.

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RS, SE
May 2015

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Christina Tsouparopoulou

Spreading the Royal Word: The (Im)Materiality of Communication in Early Mesopotamia*

This article discusses the communicative processes employed by rulers in Mesopotamia, especially in the third millennium BCE, to reach both their literate and illiterate audiences and transfer their ‘knowledge’. It is during the third millennium that city-states and empires emerged in the Fertile Crescent and an emphasis on the creation and maintenance of royal and elite ideology in the material and written record is conspicuous. The focus of this paper is on objects and practices in three periods in Mesopotamian history: the Early Dynastic, the Akkadian and the Ur III periods.

During the Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BCE), Mesopotamia was politically divided among many competing city-states, each with its own succession of rulers and dynasties. It is in this period that the first palaces are built and evidence of elite ideology is prevalent in the material record. Commissioned statues depicting the rulers were brought into temples, and a thriving class of elites arose, aiming to consolidate and stabilize their rule and power through the divine realm. Demand for luxury and exotic objects and raw materials reached a high point, and trade routes linking Southern Mesopotamia with the Persian Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Indus Valley were secured. The expression of this accumulated wealth in exotica can be seen chiefly at the Royal Cemetery in Ur.¹

The rival city-states in much of Mesopotamia and northern Syria were later unified by conquest under Sargon, the first king of the first empire in the world, the Akkadian empire (2350–2150 BCE). Sargon was succeeded by his two sons, Rimush and Manishtushu. Under Naram-Sin, the latter’s son, the empire reached its peak. Naram-Sin was the first king in Mesopotamian history to be deified, an exception rather than the rule in Ancient Near Eastern kingship traditions.² Naram-Sin’s son Sharkalisharri did not seem to have followed his father’s deification practice. By the end of Sharkalisharri’s reign, the Akkadian empire had collapsed and a dark age prevailed in Mesopotamia for a few years, while city-states in the south, such as at Lagash and Uruk, had re-asserted their independence.

* This article emerged from the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre 933 “Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies”. The CRC 933 is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

1 Woolley 1934; Zettler/Horne 1998.

2 Cooper 2008.

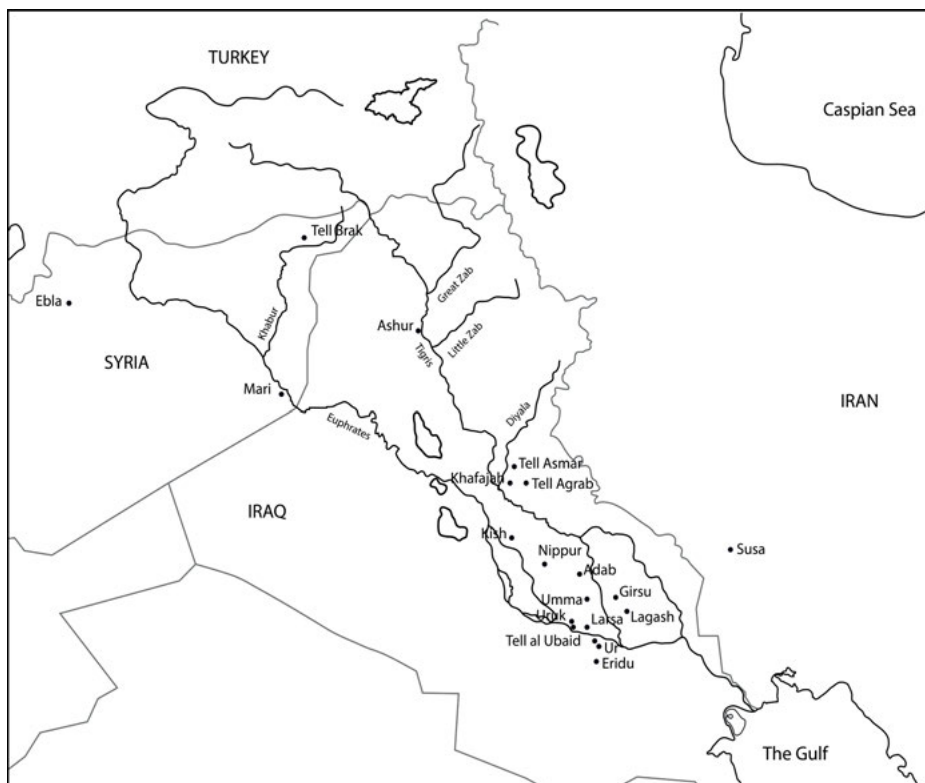


Fig. 1: Map of ancient Mesopotamia, with cities mentioned in the text.

The so-called ‘Ur III Dynasty’ was established by the general Ur-Namma and dominated a large territory of the region, stretching east into Iran and north towards the borders of Northeastern Syria, Northern Iraq and Northwestern Iran (2112–2004 BCE). Shulgi, a son of Ur-Namma, ruled for 48 years and was deified during his reign. He was succeeded by Amar-Sin, Shu-Sin and Ibbi-Sin and the Ur III ‘empire’ fell when the Elamites invaded from the East and took Ur, the capital of the Dynasty.

Examples for the materiality and immateriality of communication from these three periods in Mesopotamian history will be discussed in detail in the following pages. The aim is to show how rulers and elites spread the royal word, or the knowledge of their power. By knowledge, I mean here “*something that moves from one person to another; something that may be shared by members of a profession, a social class, a geographic region or even an entire civilization*”.³ Knowledge seems to travel through a network with nodes, links and vehicles. “*Nodes*” are “*the possessors or potential*

³ Renn/Hyman 2012, 20.

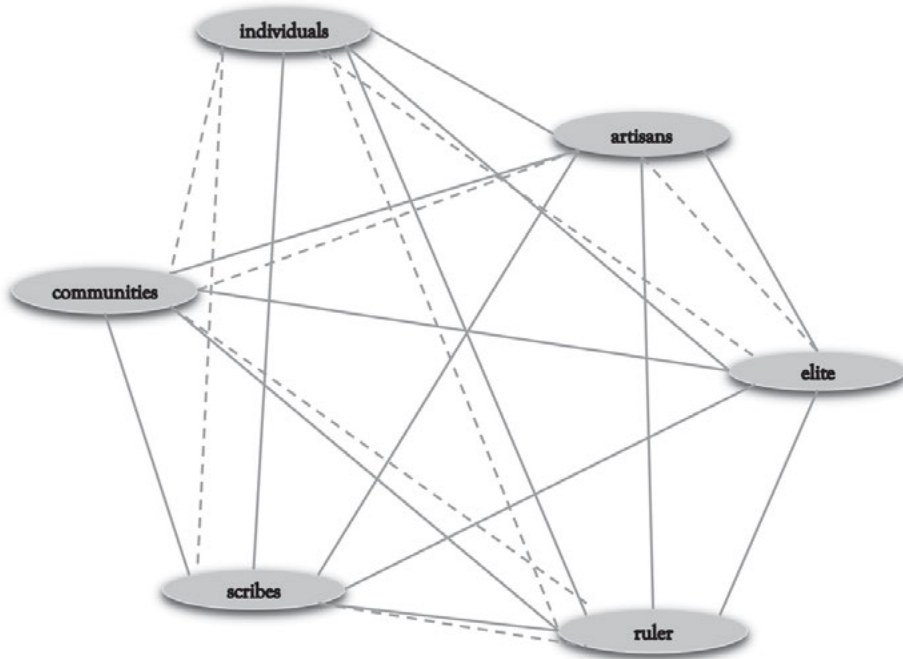


Fig. 2: Schematic diagram of communication network in early Mesopotamia. Lines refer to direct communication, dashed lines to indirect ways of communication.

possessors of knowledge, such as individuals, groups of artisans”,⁴ or elite communities. “*Links*” are “*the routes that knowledge follows to travel from one node to another*”,⁵ and can be seen in the vehicles by and with which knowledge was transmitted: artifacts intended as representations of knowledge, such as letters, and objects not explicitly intended for that, which I term ‘non-communicative’. The spoken language was also such a vehicle. In this article I focus on the links and vehicles by which knowledge traveled. The nodes are the king/ruler, the elite, the scribal community, the artisans and the people (fig. 2).

The flow of information in early Mesopotamia can be roughly thought of as a direct and indirect or vertical and horizontal process. The communication of the royal message was achieved mainly through direct means, be they oral, visual, written or based on a symbiosis of text and image, oral and written. But there were also processes by which the royal message was indirectly conveyed to the people. This was achieved through word of mouth, through gossiping or by spreading the news

⁴ Renn/Hyman 2012, 28.

⁵ Renn/Hyman 2012, 28.

and discussing it, rather than proclaiming it. I will now discuss these processes of knowledge transfer, and will briefly present communicative and non-communicative objects, crucial in both chains of information flow.

1 Direct Communication

1.1 Letters

The Mesopotamian communicative apparatus par excellence is the letter. It combines all three direct forms of communication, namely the written, the visual and the oral.



Thousands of letters exist in museums and collections around the world. People communicated their business, their problems, and their orders by letters. They might themselves know how to write a letter, or they might have asked for the intervention of a scribe. Many categories of letters are known: diplomatic letters, for example, royal letters and letters from and to ambassadors; official letters; business letters, such as letters from and to merchants; and private letters.

A famous letter, dated to the Akkadian period, is pictured below (fig. 3). This letter, sent from a certain Ishkun-Dagan to his servant Lugal-ra and published for the first time in 1932 by Smith, has been re-edited and quoted innumerable times, for it is supposed to shed light on the fall of the Akkadian empire and especially the end of the reign of Sharkalisharri, the king of Akkad, after the invasion of the Gutians. In this letter, which has no archaeological context and is thus difficult to ascribe to a specific household in Mesopotamia, Ishkun-Dagan encourages his servant Lugal-ra to plough the field and to ignore the nearby Gutians.

Fig. 3: Clay tablet; Akkadian letter; BM 121205, 1930,0409.1, AN604407
© Trustees of the British Museum.

Till the land and guard the livestock. And don't you dare say, "There were Gutians about, so I couldn't till the land!" Position detachments of scouts at half-league intervals and get on with tilling the land. If they spy men coming, they can attack on your behalf, while you get the livestock safely into town.⁶

Apart from relaying information in written form, messengers were also employed to read the text aloud, to convey the content of the letter orally. Phrases used in Sumerian letters offer hints as to the use of messengers to read the message aloud or even perhaps to explain points in the letter. As an example, an 'archival letter', i.e. "letters written between real people for everyday purposes of communication",⁷ is given below:

Say to Enlil-isa: give 360 litres of dates to Nur-Adad! It is urgent! Do not go against him!⁸

The phrase 'say to' signifies that the letter was to be read aloud to the recipient without being given to him physically. Thus it seems that the content of the letter was conveyed both in writing and orally. Nonetheless, many letters were also impressed with the cylinder seal of the sender, introducing another distinctive feature that facilitated communication without resorting only to the written or oral word, but through visual means (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Clay tablet with envelope of the Old Assyrian period from Kültepe (Kanesh); letter from Gnum-Aššur to three clients. The envelope carrying the letter was sealed eight times with the same seal, a drawing of which is to be found on the right. BM 113572a © Trustees of the British Museum. Drawing of composite seal taken from Garelli and Collon 1975, seal no 74.

The seal, which is a cylindrically shaped object usually made of stone, carrying a distinct design and sometimes an inscription providing information about its

⁶ Kienast/Volk 1995, Gir 19.

⁷ Huber Vuillet 2011, 487.

⁸ Michalowski 1993, no. 206, Ur III period, 2112–2004 BCE.

owner (fig. 5), is another important communicative apparatus of the ancient world. Impressed on a letter, it at once identified its sender.



Fig. 5: Greenstone cylinder seal and its modern impression (BM 89126) of Hash-Hamer, the governor of the city of Ishkun-Sin. It depicts the owner in a fringed robe, bald and clean-shaven, being led by a goddess towards the king, possibly Ur-Namma. Ur III period; possibly found at Babylon before 1840 © Trustees of the British Museum.

1.2 Schools (*e₂-dubba* = ‘tablet house’)

Another major vehicle for knowledge transfer and information flow was the school. In the scribal schools of Mesopotamia, students, usually of elite background, learned how to make clay tablets and styli, how to read and write, how to calculate and survey, and in some schools there was also music instruction. Life in these schools is described in many Sumerian literary compositions. An infamous description of the life of a schoolboy was published by Kramer in 1949:

Schoolboy, what did you do in the tablet-house?
 I read my tablet aloud, I ate my lunch,
 I made a tablet, and finished my writing exercise.
 After I was let out of school, I would go home and my father was sitting there.
 I recited my daily exercises for him,
 Read my tablet aloud; my father was pleased.⁹

There were different ways for the pupils to learn how to read and write. The curriculum included lexical lists, vocabularies, syllabaries and grammatical lists. Pupils also

⁹ Translation taken from Tinney 1998, after Kramer 1949, 205.

learned how to write letters and contracts by copying model letters and contracts.¹⁰ It was also very important for scribes to learn how to write royal inscriptions. The following literary letter from Aba-indasa to Shulgi Aba-indasa proves this:

Your servant thus says: "You are mighty: I will follow my king; of your word, I will be your messenger; standing on a boat, I will pull the oar; standing on land(?), I will... ; I am a scribe (and) I can write a stele."¹¹

Another way of learning at schools was by copying royal inscriptions, royal hymns and other writings proclaiming the military prowess and political power of past and present rulers. On the left part of a Neo-Babylonian exercise tablet is a spelling exercise, while on the right part there is the beginning of the 'birth legend of Sargon',¹² a proclamation of the almighty power of Sargon of Agade and his humble beginnings:

Sargon, mighty king, king of Agade, am I.
My mother was a high priestess, my father I knew not;
My father's brothers live in the mountains;
My city is Azupiranu, situated on the banks of the Euphrates
My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, in secret she bore me;
She placed me in a basket of rushes, she sealed the lid with bitumen;
She cast me into the river which did not rise over me;
The river bore me up and carried me to Aqqi, the water-drawer.
Aqqi, the water-drawer, lifted me out as he dipped his bucket;
Aqqi, the water-drawer, adopted me, brought me up;
Aqqi, the water-drawer, set me up as his gardener.
As a gardener, Ishtar, loved me;
For 55 years I ruled as king.

A quite uncommon Old Akkadian exercise tablet was excavated at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), in the Diyala River valley. It narrates the great revolt against Naram-Sin, king of the Akkadian empire, and his triumph over the rebellious city-states. This tablet was found outside a private house in Eshnunna, possibly after being thrown away by the occupants of the house.¹³ Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it seems to be the exercise tablet of a pupil narrating a contemporary historical event.¹⁴ According to Foster,¹⁵ this exercise must have been a student's copy of a genuine contemporary (royal) inscription. Irrespective of the transmission channels of this story, whether

¹⁰ Pearce 1995.

¹¹ Sjöberg 1975, 166.

¹² Lewis 1980.

¹³ This fragment (TA 31, 729) was found in the 1931/32 season at Tell Asmar (Delougaz et al. 1967, As. 31: T.729); the text was published by Gelb in 1952 and is known as MAD 1: 172.

¹⁴ Westenholz 1997, 223–229.

¹⁵ Foster 1990, 44 n. 14.

oral (the teacher narrating/dictating the story to the student) or written (copying the original inscription), the importance of learning about a contemporary historical event related to the almighty power of the king through copying or writing it, proves all the more that schooling acted as a propagandistic mechanism. Apprentice-scribes were acquainted with the royal word through the learning method of copying royal inscriptions/events and were thus indoctrinated while being educated.¹⁶

1.3 Visual Texts

Both letters and schools catered mostly for the literate population. The question thus arises: how was a large part of the population acquainted with the royal word? Two vehicles in which knowledge was carried, enabling an illiterate person to be included as a node, must have existed in early Mesopotamia: a visual and an oral one.

Imagery played a very important role in early Mesopotamia. Apart from aesthetics, imagery carried a narrative¹⁷ and could have been substituted for the written word. I will use the term visual text, or pictorial narrative as defined by Irene Winter. Visual texts contain action and are not only descriptive. They do not repeat nor illustrate a text, but they tell a story, which is also readable through their images. Sometimes text accompanies the image, providing more details of the narrative of the picture. But not all images required a text to be understood by their contemporaries; the monument and the imagery it carried alone could have equally told the story.

One such visual text is the famous Stela of the Vultures. Stelae were common in the third millennium, their main function being to denote the borders of fields, as boundary stones and as public commemorative monuments. The Stela of the Vultures was carved sometime during the reign of Eannatum, the city-governor and the ruler of Lagash, during the Early Dynastic period, around 2460 BCE. Six fragments were excavated by Ernest de Sarzec at Tello (ancient Girsu) in the 1880s, while a seventh appeared on the art market and was acquired by the British Museum in 1898. The stela has now been reconstructed from these seven fragments and is displayed in the Louvre. It is made of white limestone, and restored, it measures 180 cm in height and 130 cm in width; its weight should have been around 700 kg. It is carved in high, well-modeled relief on both obverse and reverse and is continually inscribed.

A lengthy inscription in Sumerian narrates the conflict between the city-states of Lagash and Umma over the common border, and records the victory won by Eannatum. The text is concerned with the historical context of the conflict, the dream oracle given to the king when he went to the temple for divine instruction, and the eventual triumph of the king of Lagash. It reads as a historical piece, although written most

¹⁶ Michalowski 1987.

¹⁷ Perkins 1957.

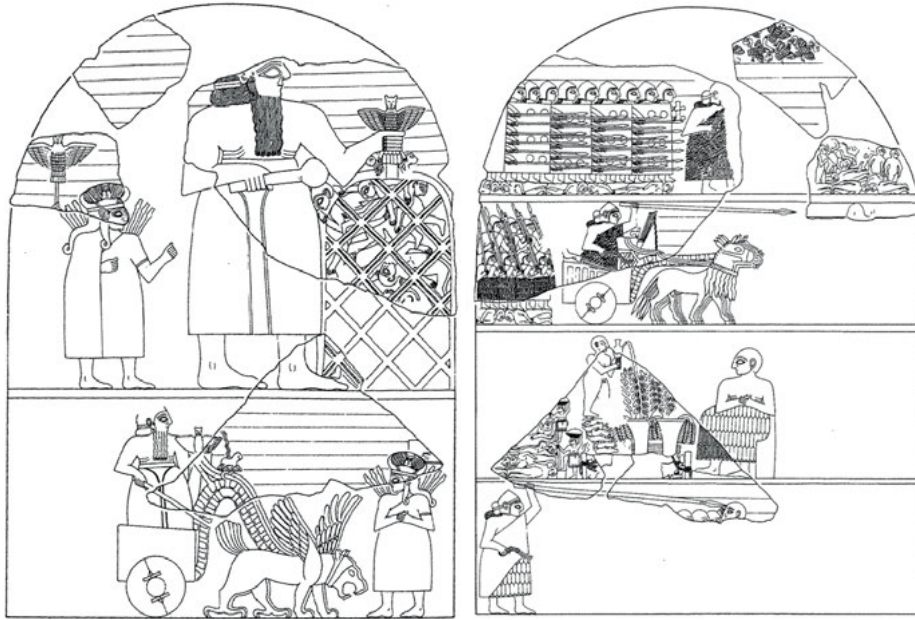


Fig. 6: Reconstructed drawing of both sides of the Stela of the Vultures; Tello, c. 2450 BC, Eannatum ruler of Lagash. Drawn by Elizabeth Simpson, taken from Winter 1985.

probably by contemporaries, at the request of the king of Lagash. The border dispute between Umma and Lagash is quite well known; both cities wanted to annex their neighbor's fields and often went to war. This stela represents one victorious 'settlement' of the land dispute, from the Lagashite ruler.

The image, on the other hand, narrates the current victory of Lagash over Umma. On the obverse, the so-called mythological side, 'the battle is over'.¹⁸ On the upper register Ningirsu, the patron-god of Lagash, entraps the enemies in a gigantic net and strikes them with his mace. The smaller figure behind Ningirsu is Ninhursag, the Lady of the Mountain and mother of Ningirsu. On the lower register, Ninhursag stands before Ningirsu, who rides on a chariot pulled by mythical animals. This side symbolizes the divine patronage and sacred nature of Eannatum's victory. The reverse side is comprised of four registers. It depicts battle scenes with Eannatum marching at the head of his troops, who advance in a phalanx, and the dead bodies of the Ummaites, the enemy on the right side. Vultures are flying above them, carrying the severed heads of enemy soldiers in their beaks. In the second register, the ruler is depicted in his chariot leading a victory parade. The third register depicts libation

¹⁸ Winter 1985.

rituals performed by a naked priest before the seated ruler. Small figures on the left side seem to construct piles of the enemies' corpses. The fourth register has not been preserved well enough to be reconstructed. This side visualizes the battle and the 'well-deserved' victory of Lagash over Umma.

This stela is an example of a monument both inscribed and illustrated, although the text and the image tell a different story. The imagery presents the present, whereas the text gives information about the history of the conflict. According to Winter,¹⁹ text and image complement each other but do not repeat each other. Both text and image had their own structure and function. The function of the visual narrative was different from that of the text, and it was presumably addressed to the wider public, emphasizing the divine intervention and will of Ningirsu in the decisive battle and triumph over Umma. In this case, the narrative nature of the stela aided communication with the public, emphasizing the divine patronage of the Lagashite ruler. Lau (forthcoming) has recently suggested that the obverse side of the stela must have been placed facing the border of Umma, with the Ummaites being the recipients of the mythological message, while the worldly side, the reverse, would have faced the Lagashites. This double-functioned communicative nature of a stela is intriguing and worth pursuing further in order to assess in detail the communicative facets of such vehicles.

1.4 Oral Means of Knowledge Transfer

Apart from visual and written texts, information was also transferred orally. Two speech mechanisms, a formal and an informal one, seem to exist in most state societies, and Mesopotamia can be no exception. Due to the nature of our evidence, which is mostly public records of social realities, we are more acquainted with the formal discursive mechanism in early Mesopotamia. This culminates in the function of the herald (*nigir*), a public official who was responsible for making public announcements on behalf of the administration, recruiting workers and soldiers.²⁰ We know, for example, that when a cylinder seal was lost, there was a public announcement; a herald blew his horn to announce to everyone in the city that all transactions verified by that seal should henceforth be considered obsolete:

A seal inscribed with the name of Ur-DUN, the merchant, was lost. In accordance with the word of the assembly, the herald has sounded the horn throughout all the streets: no one now has any claim against him.²¹

¹⁹ Winter 1985.

²⁰ Sassmannshausen 1995.

²¹ Steinkeller 1977, 48. This translation refers to a composite text edited from five different tablets. See especially Ali 1964 and Hallo 1975.

Other ‘public’ carriers of knowledge were the messengers. As discussed above, correspondents could have simultaneously employed a messenger and a written letter to convey information, and messengers were often sent to the rulers.

Speech act performance was also an important mechanism for the circulation of the royal word. Speech act performance could be the recitation of a royal or building inscription in front of an audience, probably by a priest responsible for the rituals surrounding the founding of a new temple. Prospective vehicles for such intentional and direct knowledge transfer could have been objects carrying a royal message but purposefully hidden from public and private view, thus ‘non-communicative’ objects. Hiding inscribed sets of objects, consisting of a brick-shaped stone tablet and a copper figurine, usually peg-shaped and symbolizing the king as a builder, beneath the foundations of temples was part of a tradition that stretches back to the beginnings of the third millennium in Mesopotamia. By the Ur III period (2112–2004), this practice was consolidated and the objects that were deposited in brick-boxes beneath the foundations of temples were standardized (fig. 7).

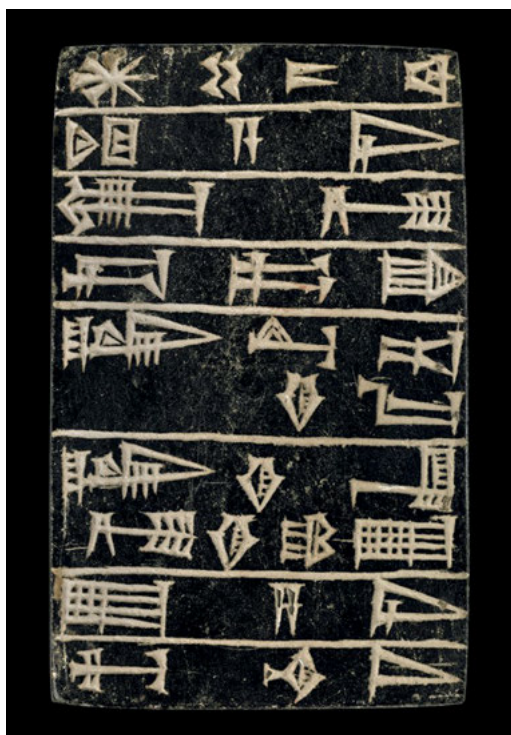


Fig. 7: On the left, foundation canephore figurine of Ur-Namma from Uruk; Ur III period; BM 113896 © Trustees of the British Museum; on the right, black steatite foundation tablet of Shulgi from the Nimintabba temple at Ur; Ur III period; BM 118560 © Trustees of the British Museum.

Both objects, the tablet and the figurine, were inscribed with a building inscription, naming the king who commissioned the building of the temple and the deity to whom the temple was dedicated. The fact that great care was taken in securing access to them raises questions as to their intended audience.²² Of course, they must have communicated their message to the gods, and to future rulers who searched for such objects as part of their restoration projects. But these objects were seemingly non-communicative for their contemporaries; it is nonetheless possible that these seemingly non-communicative objects transferred the royal word to the people.²³ Although we have no clear documentation that such a practice existed in the third millennium, we have a good basis for speculating that recitation of the text written on the building or foundation inscription took place in the rituals that surrounded the founding of a temple. We are acquainted with such ‘*public transcripts*’, as termed by Scott,²⁴ for example, in first-millennium Mesopotamia.²⁵ An interesting performance act, a “*state-sponsored theatre of cruelty and terror*”, a communicative stretching of the senses can be seen at the Royal Cemetery at Ur.²⁶

1.5 An Audience with the Ruler²⁷

A rather direct way for the royal word to be transmitted to the people was during an audience with the king himself. From the Royal Archives of Mari, in modern Syria, we are acquainted with plenty of audiences with the king, and plenty of angry messengers who were not received by the king:

...The day [I sent] this tablet of mine to [my lord], those messengers [kept shouting] in the gate of the palace, [and with] both hands [they] tore their clothes. [They] (said), ‘We came to (deliver) good words, so why can we not [], or else (why) can we not enter and meet with the king?...’²⁸

It is of course to be expected that royalty did not meet with most of the messengers carrying a letter or message.²⁹ But it seems that it was at least possible for individuals of high status to meet with the king directly. The audience halls in the palaces of Ebla, Mari, Tell Beydar, Kish and Eridu testify to the existence of special places for

²² See Tsouparopoulou 2014 and references therein.

²³ Liverani 1996.

²⁴ See Scott 1990.

²⁵ Ambos 2004, 50–52.

²⁶ Dickson 2006. One could add here the storytellers who conveyed myths and stories to a large illiterate audience. However the storytellers were not related directly to royalty, nor to the royal word.

²⁷ The author is preparing a dedicated article on this topic.

²⁸ Durand 1988, letter 370—translation: Heimpel 2003.

²⁹ Charpin 2008, 180.

meeting with the king, elaborate and impressive structures that aided the propagandistic nature of the meeting itself. In the Palace G at Ebla for example, an immense complex of courtyards, reception halls, private apartments, archives and storerooms has been unearthed, so far amounting to more than 4500 m² (fig. 8). The audience hall at the Royal Palace at Ebla was in actuality a wide open-air court, with four doors leading to focal points of the palace. The Ceremonial Staircase, leading from the

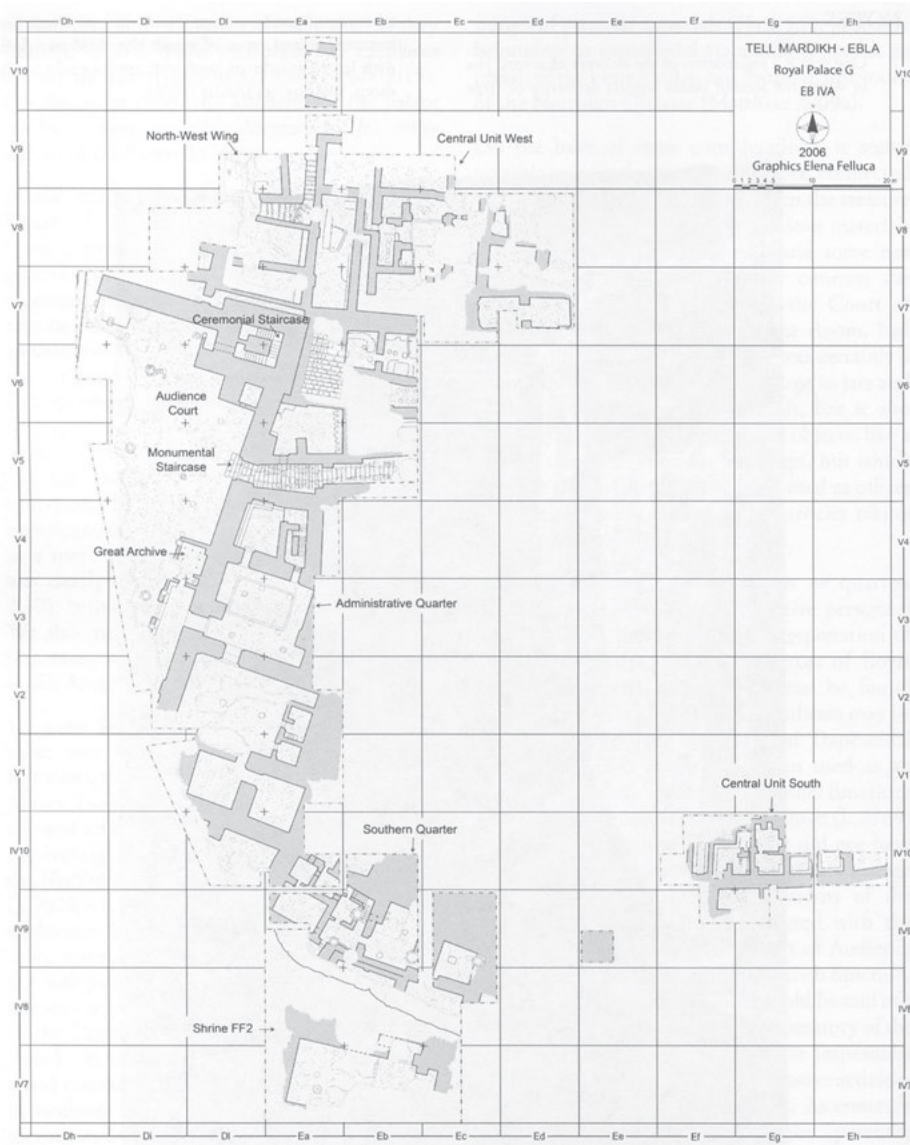


Fig. 8: Map of Royal Palace G at Ebla, taken from Matthiae 2013.

audience court to the living quarters in the north-east corner of the audience court, had steps inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The Monumental Stairway, the only entrance to the palace from the outside, had stone steps, while a door with thresholds of basalt and steps inlaid with mother-of-pearl led to the Administrative Quarter of the palace through the Throne Room and possibly the Treasury. Another door led to the Northern Quarter, which probably housed storerooms and offices related to the activities taking place in the Audience Court.³⁰

Visual representations, especially in the miniature arts, add to our knowledge about personal audiences with the king. Conspicuous is the design of many cylinder seals during the Ur III period, where the king is depicted as receiving his subjects. These designs are generally called presentation scenes, and come in different compositions, categorized according to the posture of the subject (presentee) and especially the placement of his/her hands. Such presentation scenes could be towards a deity or the king. Most high officials of the state in the Ur III period owned seals, however, which depicted them in a personal audience with the king. These are called audience scenes: the worshipper stands with his/her arms folded at the elbow and with hands clasped.³¹ Usually this type of scene showed the presentee standing alone before the king, but his/her personal goddess could also accompany him/her, as in the seal in fig. 9. These audience scenes are reserved for cylinder seals of high quality, both in the rendering of the inscription and the design, and belong to individuals of high standing in the society. This differentiation in the ownership of such seals indicates that although most officials would have been accepted by the king, only individuals of high status could stand before him as ‘equals’—if equality can be said to exist in this context.



Fig. 9: An audience with the king; composite sealing of the cylinder seal of Lugal-itida, a known high functionary of the Ur III state; taken from Tsouparopoulou forthcoming, Cat. No 201.

³⁰ Matthiae 2013.

³¹ Mayr & Owen 2005.

2 Indirect Knowledge Transfer

Information could have also passed from one person to another to be discussed among them, in a process of opinion sharing rather than opinion giving; an indirect or horizontal flow of information. The most common vehicle for this horizontal flow of information is gossip. Gossiping must have prevailed in the cities and markets of Mesopotamia. A nice account of this is given in a literary text:

At harvest time, your work does not match your appetite! You disappear from work, and they find you gossiping in the market place.³²

Due to the nature of the available documentation from Mesopotamia, it is difficult to assess gossiping and chattering as a form of mass communication. Based on later accounts, we could say that this form of mass or public communication might entail either an unintentional circulation of information, on the discussants' part, or a disguised strategy employed by elites to disseminate specific information, and thus the royal message, among the people. The scribes that inscribed these objects to be hidden forever in the foundations of the temples could have discussed the text they wrote with peers and/or family. The artisans that crafted them could have also discussed their content and message with their peers. Moreover, as discussed above, apprentice-scribes copied royal inscriptions in the schools. In this way the message of the ruling elite would have been passed on within a circular horizontal knowledge sharing.

3 Conclusions

In early Mesopotamia there were two ways for the royal word to be spread among the literate and the illiterate population: a direct way, involving written, oral and visual means and vehicles, and a horizontal, indirect way, mainly through word of mouth, through gossiping. The direct or vertical way involved correspondence, letters written, sealed and recited, schools where the main means of communication was through the written word, and personal audiences with the ruler; pertaining to the illiterate population were images, a royal propaganda mechanism, and oral carriers of information, such as the heralds, messengers, and speech-performers, reciting, for example royal inscriptions in the founding ceremonies of new temples. Equally important, however, must have been an indirect or horizontal method of transmitting knowledge, which was based on sharing rather than giving information. In this process, objects that appear non-communicative could have found a way to play a part in this information

³² After Civil 1963.

flow, mainly by word of mouth from one person to another. In this diffusion process there must have been several different stages; however we are not in a position to evaluate them. Hopefully this article will open up a new window for thinking about communication in ancient Mesopotamia that included not only the king and his elite entourage, but also the people from below, for whom most of this knowledge was destined. These people were not passive observers of history, but active participants in these knowledge transfer mechanisms; they were not spectators, but actors.

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Angeliki Karagianni

Linear B Administration: The Communicative Aspects of Written Media and the Organisation of the Mycenaean Bureaucracy*

The present paper is part of the author's ongoing research project on the materiality of the Linear B inscribed documents and on how the material properties and the very physicality of the text-bearing artefacts influenced the production of text and the organisation of the Mycenaean administrative practice during the later phases of the Late Bronze Age (hereafter LBA) (ca. 1400–1200 BC). This contribution, in particular, is structured in two parts: firstly, there are some introductory notes on the script itself (to provide context for the 'uninitiated'), as well as the research methods that Linear B scholars have developed in response to the limitations presented by the extant inscriptions. This is followed by a synthetic presentation on the organisation of the Mycenaean bureaucracy—first at a macro level (that is, at a regional/polity level), and subsequently at a micro level (that is, 'internally' at a central level)—where the role that inscribed clay tablets played in the overall system is also examined, with a particular focus on examples from Knossos on Crete, and Pylos in mainland Greece. The final section examines how the inscribed Linear B texts communicated the intended messages to their 'audience' by effectively manipulating the form of the physical medium (i.e., the clay tablet), several types of graphic devices, and a formalised administrative language in order to convey, precisely and unambiguously, the essential information they contained.

1 Introduction to the Linear B Script and the Methodology of Linear B Studies

The Linear B script is, chronologically speaking, the last writing system developed in the second millennium BC Aegean, and the only one that has as yet been deciphered. Two earlier systems also existed in this region, both with their epicentre on the island of Crete in southern Greece: the so-called Cretan Hieroglyphic and the Linear A scripts

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(fig. 1).¹ Linear B, therefore, did not emerge in a ‘writing vacuum’, but was rather a development built upon an earlier writing system (Linear A), from which it borrowed and successfully adapted the structure of the script (this time for a population that most likely spoke a different language) and a considerable part of its syllabary and ideographic signs, as well as many aspects of the existing Linear A system of administrative organisation, adapting it again to its own specific bureaucratic procedures and social-economic needs.²

Writing System	Absolute Dates	Relative Chronology
		Pre-palatial period
<i>Archanes script</i>	2100-1900	Middle Minoan IA
	1900-1850	Middle Minoan IB
		Proto-palatial period
<i>Cretan Hieroglyphic</i>	1850-1800	Middle Minoan IIA
<i>Linear A</i>	1800-1700	Middle Minoan IIB
	1700-1650	Middle Minoan IIIA
		Neo-palatial period
<i>Linear A</i>	1650-1600	Middle Minoan IIIB
	1600-1480	Late Minoan IA
	1480-1425	Late Minoan IB
		Final-palatial period
<i>Linear B</i>	1425-1390	Late Minoan II / Late Helladic IIB
	1390-1350	Late Minoan / Late Helladic IIIA 1
		Post-palatial period
	1350-1330	Late Minoan / Late Helladic IIIA2
	1330-1250	Late Minoan / Late Helladic IIIB 1
	1250-1200	Late Minoan / Late Helladic IIIB2

Fig.1: The writing systems of the second millennium BC Aegean, with absolute and relative dates.

¹ The history of writing in the prehistoric Aegean begins on Crete in about 2200/2100 BC, when the earliest pictorial signs considered to represent a form of a ‘proto-script’ (‘Archanes script’) are found on a handful of sealstones (Godart 1999; Younger 1999). A couple of centuries later, two distinct writing systems emerge more or less co-terminously on Crete, the so-called Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A scripts, both of which remain in parallel use on the island until the end of the Proto-palatial period (ca. 1700 BC). During the following Neopalatial period, only the Linear A system is used on Crete and beyond, until its sudden disappearance at the end of the same period (ca. 1450 BC). After a short chronological gap, the Linear B script emerges, again on Crete and later on the Greek mainland, and remains in use for about two centuries until its own demise in about 1200 BC (Bartoněk 2003; Bennet 2008; Duhoux 1998; Powell 2012, 128-145).

² The relationship between Linear A and Linear B has long been recognised, particularly due to the high percentage of common syllabograms (ca. 80%), of numerals and of some ideograms/logograms (Bartoněk 2003, 13; Duhoux 1989; Duhoux 1998).

The Linear B script represents the earliest epigraphic attestation of the Greek language, four centuries before the creation of the well-known Greek alphabet, with which the Greek language has been inextricably linked up to the present day.³ However, in contrast to the later phonetically-structured Greek alphabet, the earlier ‘Mycenaean’ Linear B script was a composite syllabic system, consisting of about 87 syllabograms and more than a hundred ideograms. The *syllabograms* or *phonograms* are linear signs with phonetic values, each representing a syllable of the ‘open type’, namely either pure vowels (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/), or a combination of a consonant + a vowel (/da/, /de/, /di/, /do/, /du/, etc.).⁴ On the other hand, *logograms* or *ideograms* are graphic signs that represent an object or a commodity (e.g. a chariot, or olive oil), or a living creature (e.g. human or animal); that is, they are signs with a semantic and not a phonetic value. Finally, the sign repertoire also contains individual signs for measures (different for liquid and dry commodities), as well as integer decimal numerals to count with (fig. 2).

Syllabograms / Phonograms					Logograms / Ideograms				
08 a 𐀀	38 e 𐀁	28 i 𐀂	61 o 𐀃	10 u 𐀄	100 man VIR 𐀅	102 woman MULier 𐀆		122 olives OLIVa 𐀇	
01 da 𐀈	45 de 𐀉	07 di 𐀊	14 do 𐀋	51 du 𐀌	106 sheep OVIS 𐀍	106 ^f female sheep OVIS ^f 𐀎	106 ^m male sheep OVIS ^m 𐀏	130 olive oil OLEum 𐀐	
77 ka 𐀑	44 ke 𐀒	67 ki 𐀓	70 ko 𐀔	81 ku 𐀕	107 goat CAPer 𐀖	107 ^f female goat CAPra ^f 𐀗	107 ^m male goat CAPer ^m 𐀘	176 fruit tree ARBor 𐀙	
					240 chariot BIGae 𐀚	241 chariot body CURrus 𐀛	242 chariot cab CAPsus 𐀜	243 wheel ROTA 𐀝	
Numerals					Measures				
10000 𐀞	1000 𐀟	100 𐀠	10 -	1 I	Weight 118 L 𐀡	117 M 𐀢	116 N #	115 P 𐀣	114 Q 𐀤
					Dry measure 112 T 𐀥	111 V 𐀦	110 Z 𐀧		
					Liquid measure 113 S 𐀨	111 V 𐀦	110 Z 𐀧		

Fig.2: Indicative sample of Linear B syllabograms, ideograms, numerals and units of measurement (selected from Palmer 2008, pp. 62–65, figs. 2.2–2.4).

Linear B script was in use for about two centuries in several regions on Crete and in mainland Greece (fig. 3), although the story of its invention and development is still a subject of inquiry.⁵ The earliest examples of the script are found at Knossos, on the island of Crete, and date slightly before the beginning of the 14th century BC, whereas

3 Cf. Adrados 2005; Bartoněk 2003; Powell 1991.

4 There are also a few consonant + glide + vowel combinations (e.g. /nwa/, /dwe/, etc.).

5 Cf. Palaima 1988a; Powell 2012, 135.

its disappearance coincides with the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial institutions on the Greek mainland at the end of the LH IIIB, i.e. around 1200 BC. Unfortunately, the deposits that contain inscribed documents in Linear B are often highly problematic in terms of dating, or they belong to different destruction horizons. For example, the earliest texts were found at Knossos in the assemblage of the Room of the Chariot tablets (late LM II—early LM IIIA1), but the main corpus from the same site comes from the next phase, LM IIIA2 (ca.1350–1330 BC), with a few tablets perhaps belonging to an even later destruction in the LM IIIB1 period (first half of the 13th century BC).⁶ On the other hand, almost all of the inscribed documents from the Mycenaean sites on the Greek mainland and from Chania on Crete are dated from the mid to later 13th century BC (whether LH IIIB 1, IIIB 2, or transitional LH IIIB-C), with only a few examples attributed to earlier dates.⁷

Despite the chronologically segmented and discontinuous assemblages of extant documents and the geographical diversity of the recovered deposits, the Mycenaean Linear B script shows a remarkable conformity across time and place, remaining more or less consistent over the whole period of its use, with respect to document typology and scribal practices, sign repertoire and graphic styles, conventional transactional vocabulary and technical terms, language and palaeographic traditions.⁸ The striking similarities observed between Linear B documents from different sites—though separated in space and time—do not seem to have been the result of a political imposition by a single, over-arching centre, or due to the existence of a form of political consolidation (or confederation) between different Mycenaean states. From present archaeological and textual evidence it seems that Mycenaean Greece was composed of a number of independent peer polities, which surely were in contact with one another, influencing cultural forms and practices, but nevertheless each adhering to its own historical contingencies and local/regional developments.⁹ Thus, without overlooking the observable cultural and historical divergences, it must be recognised that the

⁶ For a more detailed examination of the chronologies of the different Linear B deposits, see Driessen 2008. For the chronological segmentation of the Linear B assemblages from Knossos, see Driessen 1990; Driessen 1997; Firth 2000–2001.

⁷ The exceptions at present are: a tablet from the Petsas House at Mycenae dating to LH IIIA2 (Shelton 2006); a single tablet from Iklaina dated in LH IIIA 1/2 (Shelmerdine 2012); a handful of tablets from Pylos that may predate the main assemblage belonging to an earlier destruction in LH IIIA (Skelton 2009); and the newly excavated Linear B assemblage from Agios Vasilios/Xirokampi Laconias, which, according to preliminary reports, is dated to the early LH IIIA2 phase (Aravantinos/Vasilogamvrou 2012).

⁸ Palaima 2003, 159, 162 and note 10; Shelmerdine 2008, 148.

⁹ Cf. Palaima 2004a, 283; Shelmerdine 1999; Shelmerdine 2008, 148–151. There is to date only one textual testimony for the movement of goods between two Mycenaean centres: MY X 508 is a small tablet found in Mycenae which records the shipment of a type of cloth to Thebes (*te-qa-de*), most likely the administrative centre located in Boeotia, from where Linear B documents have also been recovered (Killen 2008, 187f.; Shelmerdine 2008, 151).

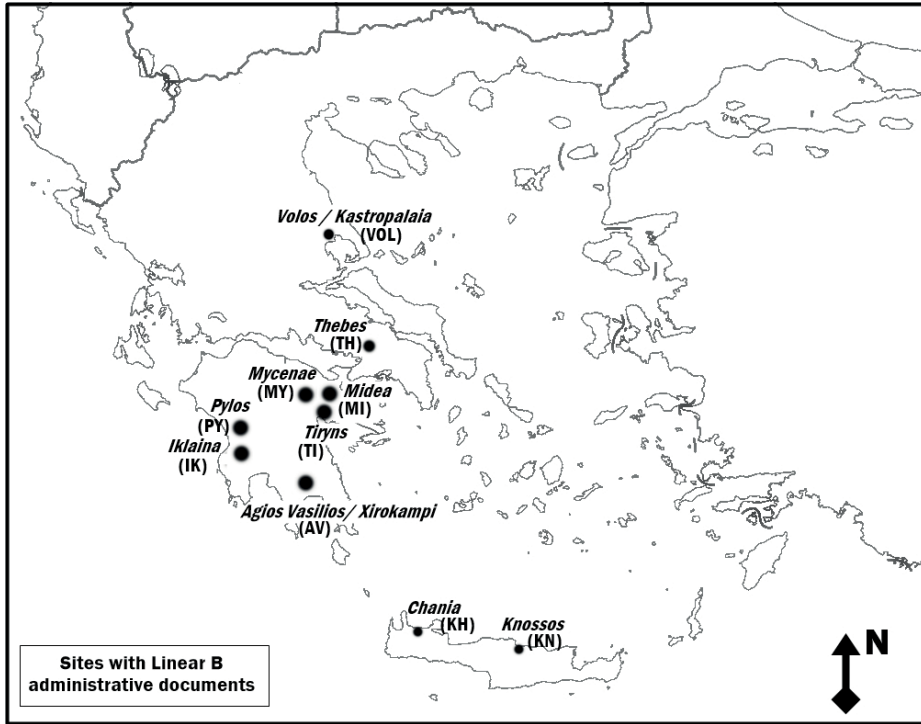


Fig.3: Map of the Aegean region, marking the sites with Linear B administrative documents.

Mycenaean world of the LBA period presents us with a high degree of homogeneity and uniformity, especially in terms of scribal practices, which should probably be viewed as the result of a strict formalisation in administrative practices rather than as evidence for the existence of a form of political unity between the different states.¹⁰

Nearly all of the Linear B administrative documents come from palatial contexts, that is, from large regional centres with a multifunctional building (the ‘palace’) at their core.¹¹ These centres played the major role in the political, economic, religious and social life of a wider territory that included scattered towns and villages of varying

¹⁰ Cf. Driessen 2000, 218; Palaima 2004a, 283.

¹¹ Cf. Shelmerdine 2008; Shelmerdine/Bennet 2008. The term ‘palace’ has a double meaning in the Aegean archaeology, depending on context: in particular, it indicates a large, complex architectural building that housed the seat of the prime political authority of the time, and often, by extension, the socio-political and economic systems that operated during the period in which these complex structures functioned.

sizes.¹² No Linear B tablet has been found outside these contexts,¹³ suggesting that the use of the script and the practice of writing as a whole was practically utilised only within a restricted environment (the palace bureaucracy), which was occupied exclusively with the monitoring of economic-productive activities and internal administrative concerns, as we shall see shortly.

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of the Mycenaean bureaucratic organisation and the role of written documentation within it, it is necessary to briefly summarise the main methodological and interpretive limitations we face when dealing with the Linear B material, as well as the approaches adopted in Mycenaean studies to cope with them. Firstly, there is a relatively small number of documents at our disposal: just a few thousand complete and fragmentary tablets and sealings from all of the Mycenaean sites combined, without, of course, forgetting that the preserved documents come from deposits that are often separated in time, having been stratified during different destruction events (see above).¹⁴ Secondly, there is a strong preservation bias that particularly accounts for the limited number of recovered inscriptions, since the clay documents were originally left to dry naturally and were not intentionally baked. Thus, even these few thousand inscriptions we currently possess were only preserved because they were fired accidentally in the conflagrations that destroyed the buildings in which they were contained, transforming the clay into a more durable ceramic material.

Furthermore (and I shall return to this point later on), our documents were limited in scope and subject matter, consisting exclusively of administrative records that dealt with certain economic transactions and internal administrative affairs. This limited thematic coverage, coupled with the fact that the inscribed documents were not intended for long-term preservation,¹⁵ complicates the overall assessment of long-term trends in the economy, or even a 'full-spectrum' reconstruction of the synchronic economic and productive management at any one particular Mycenaean centre of the

12 Recent studies have re-evaluated the extent of palatial involvement in all aspects of regional economic life, emphasising the role that 'extra-palatial' forces also played in these spheres at an inter- and intra-polity level, operating alongside and occasionally in collaboration with the palatial sector (cf. Bennet 2007; Galaty/Parkinson 2007; Halstead 2001; Voutsaki/Killen 2001).

13 For the case of the recently found tablet at Iklaina, see note 53 below.

14 It is very difficult to provide exact numbers for the whole corpus of recovered Linear B inscribed material, due to the ongoing and painstaking process of joining together fragments of tablets that originally constituted a single tablet, as well as recent discoveries of new inscribed documents. Overall, there are now about six thousand complete and fragmentary inscriptions from sites on Crete and the Mainland.

15 Both textual and pinacological evidence point to this conclusion: the fact that clay tablets were left unbaked so that they could be recycled and reused, plus the existence of a handful of expressions like 'this year', 'next year', 'last year' and the general lack of dating textual references, indicate that Mycenaean scribal administration operated in a 'window' of one year, or slightly more (Bennet 2001; Palaima 2003, 172).

time. Thus, in contrast to other contemporary cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, in the Aegean we do not have written archives that go far back in time; our texts are day-to-day records, kept for a short consultation period of about a year, and they portray a selective documentary coverage as much as a limited administrative reach.¹⁶ Further problems pertain to the very nature of our texts: they are all very laconic, containing in most cases the minimum necessary information that their handlers required for the monitoring and fulfilment of the recorded transactions. This fact, combined with the frequent semantic ambiguity of the syllabically-rendered words, often renders the meaning of the inscription obscure and uncertain.

To account, therefore, for all these various *lacunae* in our textual evidence and to enhance our understanding of the documentary evidence, scholars have utilised a multi-perspective approach, drawing on a wide range of related disciplinary sub-branches, such as palaeography, pinacology, linguistics, epigraphy, and of course archaeology.¹⁷ Since, for example, the archaeological record is less discontinuous in time than the textual record, it is generally more instructive on the range of goods, artifacts and foodstuffs that were used and consumed not only in the palaces, but also in non-palatial contexts, which themselves lack any sort of epigraphic sources.¹⁸ Our current ability to identify individual ‘working’ scribes at any one palatial centre is based on careful and specialised palaeographic studies, since the Mycenaean ‘tablet-writers’ remained completely anonymous of their own accord.¹⁹ Thus, through a combinatory and painstaking contextual approach, which integrates data from palaeographic, pinacological, epigraphic and archaeological investigations, we have been able to discern ‘sets’ of related documents,²⁰ understand how written records were used in monitoring the several economic transactions and running the palatially-controlled industries and how the mobilisation of resources and manpower operated, and in general reconstruct the workings of different Mycenaean bureaucracies

16 Killen 2008, 162ff.; Steele 2008. It has been estimated, based on the appearance of month-names and other internal textual references, that the extant Pylos tablets refer to a period of three to five months, whereas those from LM IIIA2 Knossos cover about five to eight months (Palaima 2004a, 286).

17 Cf. Bennet 1988; Driessen 2000; Palaima 2004a; Palaima 2011. The term *palaeography* refers to the study of individual hand-writing styles, while *pinacology* is a technical term that refers to the study of the clay tablets as physical objects.

18 For relevant examples, cf. Halstead 1992; Halstead 2001; Halstead 2007; Stocker/Davis 2004; Whitelaw 2001.

19 The main palaeographic studies are Olivier 1967 and Driessen 2000 for the scribal hands at Knossos, Palaima 1988b for those at Pylos, and Varias García 1993 for Mycenae.

20 A coherent ‘set’ of clay documents is a group of Linear B tablets of the same shape and size, similar format and textual layout, that were most commonly compiled by a single scribe or a few collaborating scribes, and which contained information on the same subject(s); in many cases, these several tablets were actually compiled for the same administrative task(s) and were stored together with the intention to be read as a single document (Chadwick 1976, 22; Palaima 2011, 56).

and see the wider political, economic, religious and social environments at each particular Mycenaean centre and in LBA Greece as a whole.²¹

From the issues described above, it becomes readily apparent that in Linear B studies documentary material is often analysed not only with reference to its linguistic and etymological interpretation, but often through a more complex and integrative contextual approach that embraces components from different but related sub-disciplines. This is the approach adopted here as well: Linear B inscribed documents are viewed primarily as text-bearing archaeological artefacts that are approached and analysed with respect to their intrinsic materiality and textuality as well as contextual associations, all of which are crucial for reconstructing their purpose, role, and overall function in the complex and often diverse system(s) within which and for which they originally operated. Lastly, it cannot be stressed enough that the synthetic presentation that follows on the organisation of the LBA Mycenaean bureaucracy is fully indebted to research, both textual and ‘extra-textual’, that has been undertaken by a multitude of specialised researchers in the various sub-disciplines related to inscribed objects.

2 Mycenaean Bureaucracy and Mycenaean Economic Organisation

As with many social concepts, ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘administration’ are short-hand terms for complex systems that, although they present some standard features across cultures and periods, are nevertheless historical, social and culture-specific constructs that should be examined and understood in their particular and wider socio-political context(s).²² In general, *bureaucracy* refers to a complex system of organisation with a hierarchical chain of command that is systematically organised and regularly operated by specialised personnel with various responsibilities, who set up, monitor, and regulate the system and ensure that the policies, goals, executive orders and the like are carried out and communicated from those who dictate them to those whom they concern.²³ In this complex system of organisation, which depends heavily on the effective processing of information from one interrelated level to the next, and involves a multiplicity of individuals and means or ways of action(s), *communication* is of primary importance. Communication is also a broad concept which is neverthe-

²¹ Cf. Chadwick 1976; Duhoux/Morpurgo Davies 2008; Duhoux/Morpurgo Davies 2011; Galaty/Parkinson 2007; Palaima 2003, 154ff.; Palaima 2011; Shelmerdine 1999; Shelmerdine 2006.

²² For different models of bureaucratic organisation in ancient periods and cultures, cf. Brosius 2003; Ferioli et al. 1994; Gibson/Biggs 1987.

²³ Driessen 1999, 205; Driessen 2000, 225.

less most commonly defined as the exchange of thoughts, ideas and information from one party ('the sender') to another ('the receiver'). This exchange is enabled by the use of a variety of media (e.g. words, gestures, images, writing, etc.), but in every case, for any communicative act to be effective, both parties need to partake of the same communicative system, to share the same 'vocabulary' and, thus, to be able to encode and decode the same messages in largely the same way.

During the later phases of the LBA Aegean (ca. 1400–1200 BC), Linear B script was the main vehicle of the central administration and the sole writing system in use in the Mycenaean world. Despite the political fragmentation of the LBA Mycenaean states (see above), in terms of administrative organisation and economic management all Mycenaean bureaucracies show a remarkable consistency in how and for what purposes, writing was used within this system.

The Mycenaean economy has been often characterised as 'redistributive', in the sense that there was an appropriational movement of resources from the regional towns to the palatial centre and then back out to the same regions.²⁴ Although as a general term it is still in use—broadly, and vaguely, fitting the overall picture—recent studies have called for a more critical approach to the concept of 'redistribution' as an economic model for the LBA Aegean. These studies propose that Mycenaean political economies would be better understood as 'command economies', namely, systems that were more interested in the 'mobilisation' of resources, in the sense described by Earle as "the recruitment of goods and services for the benefit of a group not coterminous with the contributing members".²⁵ This model of 'redistributive mobilisation' more aptly explains the selective character of palatial involvement in the economic activity of the polity, the centralised control exercised on certain varieties of commodities and goods (e.g., wool, olive oil, grains, etc.) and the essentially asymmetrical flow of resources between the palace and its territories/subjects. In this system, the appropriated wealth in foodstuff, raw materials and crafted goods, collected from territories and individuals, was closely monitored before and after it was redistributed to only certain selected individuals and/or groups of specialised personnel and craftsmen (either as materials for the manufacture of goods, or as subsistence rations for the industrial workgroups), and it was essentially structured so as to finance, support and sustain the power and prestige of the palatial ruling elites.²⁶

The extant Linear B documents deal with a variety of administrative operations, which could be roughly categorised in three main spheres: large-scale agriculture, animal husbandry, and manufacturing industries—the last most likely connected

²⁴ Killen 2008, 173f. and note 26 below.

²⁵ Earle 1977, 215; cf. Bennet 2007, 190; Nakassis et al. 2011.

²⁶ Cf. Halstead 1992; Halstead 2007; Killen 2008, 175ff.; Nakassis 2010; Palaima 2004a, with extensive relevant bibliography.

with regional and probably wider trade and exchange networks.²⁷ Besides these three broad categories, records of taxation, land-holdings, religious offerings, contributions of several types of foodstuffs to festivals and state-sponsored banquets, inventories of various commodities and crafted items, and many other operations are also attested.²⁸ Overall, the Linear B texts document a variety of transactions, as well as recording a multiplicity of people from differing social strata, who all appear to work for, or are somehow engaged with, operations that were of interest to the palace bureaucracy.

In this context it becomes easily understandable that the communication and handling of information was of paramount importance for those charged with the effective running of the palatial economy, and written administration was a particularly effective tool for this purpose. From textual and archaeological evidence it becomes clear that the Mycenaean scribes were not only responsible for recording incoming and outgoing commodities, materials and foodstuffs that were physically delivered and/or stored in the palace proper, but were also charged with keeping track of a great many diverse incoming and outgoing *data* that involved operations, transactions, and individuals, located outside of the regional centre itself, often even at quite some distance from it.²⁹ For example, it has been estimated that the palace of Knossos amassed detailed information for a substantial number of sheep flocks that were scattered over the greater part of Central Crete. About 100,000 sheep were probably originally contained in the relevant Da-Dg/Dv series, which could have provided annually about 30–50 tonnes of wool—the raw material that ‘fuelled’ the Knossian textile industry, the major productive operation of that polity.³⁰ However, most scholars agree that the massive estimated amounts of harvested wool per year were never physically delivered to the palace; rather, the wool was directly distributed from the sheep grazing locales to the nearby settlements for processing and transformation into woven textiles by specialised workgroups already located at these places. Thus, in this and other cases, it seems that the *information* on procured materials and goods actually reached the palace, rather than the recorded items or animals themselves.

However, how this system of information-gathering was actually conveyed to the central bureaucracy from the outlying regions, by whom and how regularly, is left unclear and can only be indirectly extrapolated from textual and extra-textual indications.

²⁷ Bennet 2007, 201–204; Killen 2008, 181–189.

²⁸ Cf. Killen 2008; Palaima 2003, 166f; Palaima 2004, 269ff.; Shelmerdine 2008, 138ff.

²⁹ Cf. Palaima 2003; Palaima 2004a.

³⁰ Halstead 2007, 70; Killen 1964; Killen 1979; Killen 1984b; Killen 2008, 173.

3 Macro- and Micro-Levels of Mycenaean Bureaucracy

From a combined view of palaeography, pinacology and archaeological context, we can venture some inferences on the ways Mycenaean administration(s) was organised at both a macro- and micro-level.³¹ Unfortunately, since no individual site can provide sufficient evidence to draw a more holistic picture of the structure of the administration, the general picture described below is necessarily a composite one, combining elements from different Linear B assemblages, primarily those from Knossos and Pylos.

Starting with the macro-level, as already mentioned, the palatial centre stood at the top of the bureaucratic organisation. Bennet (for Knossos) and Palaima (for Pylos), among others, have proposed that the Linear B macro-economic organisation operated broadly in a three-tiered hierarchical system of administrative control that was enforced from the top down in a chain of decreasing command, springing from: a) the central administration located in the palace building (or adjacent subsidiary structures) at the ‘capital’ of the polity and operated by the palace bureaucracy, to b) the second-order centres, which were scattered in the polity’s districts and handled by various types of local officials and representatives of the palatial institution, down to c) the lesser settlements within these districts, collective groups and individuals of various occupations and social standings (fig. 4).³²

On the other hand, the flow of resources mostly travelled in the opposite direction: we see that individuals, groups and whole communities were taxed or expected to contribute foodstuffs and various types of goods (raw materials, animals and crafted items), or to offer services (military services, *corvée* labour, etc.) to the palatial authority, in return for land holdings, tax exemptions, and perhaps even an official position in the social-political hierarchy.³³ The collected goods were then channelled to other uses, such as: to palace-controlled industries (particularly the textile industry and perfumed oil production) for the manufacturing process and to feed the employed specialised personnel; to the procurement of raw materials (e.g. alum) from ‘extra-palatial’ agents; to fulfil the obligation of the palace authority towards the divine sphere (in the form of offerings and gifts to the gods and their institutions); and to fund state-sponsored banquets and popular religious festivities.³⁴

³¹ The term ‘macro-level’ describes the way the administration was organised in a wider regional/polity level, while ‘micro-level’ refers to the internal organisation of the palatial bureaucracy that was located at the administrative centre itself.

³² Bennet 1985; Bennet 1990; Palaima 1987b; Palaima 2001; cf. Driessen 1999; Del Frio 2009 (for Thebes).

³³ Cf. Killen 2008, 164ff.; Nakassis 2010; Palaima 2012; Shelmerdine 2008.

³⁴ Cf. Bendall 2007; Killen 2008, 191–194; Palaima 2004a, with extensive bibliography.

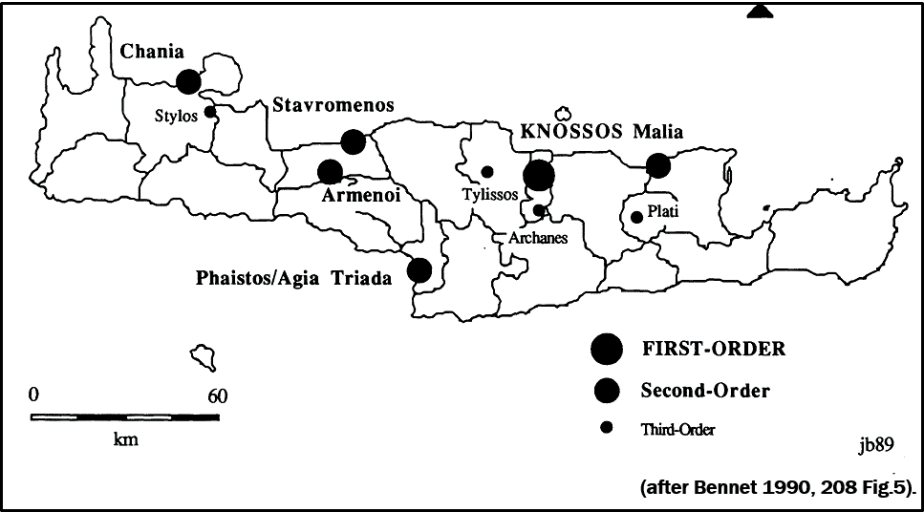


Fig. 4: Linear B organisation and settlement hierarchy in LM III Crete, according to archaeological and textual evidence as proposed by Bennet (after Bennet 1990, 280 fig.5).

IDEOGRAM	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
TRANSCRIPTION/ TRANSLITERATION	*146	RI	KE	*152	O	ME
IDENTIFICATION	a simple type of textile	linen thread? (rinon?)	beeswax? (keros?)	oxhide	unclear	honey?? (meri?)
PROPORTIONAL RELATIONSHIP	7:	7:	2:	3:	1.5:	150
MEASURE	numeral	volume	volume	numeral	volume	numeral

Fig. 5: The six standard commodities recorded on the PY Ma taxation tablets, their identification (secure and/or tentative) and the fixed ratio to one another.

Particularly indicative of the macro-economic ‘upward’ mobilisation is the system of direct procurement of resources (raw materials, staples and crafted goods) through some sort of taxation.³⁵ Especially revealing in this respect is the regional taxation system at Pylos (Ma series), which records the direct acquisition of six standard commodities from the sixteen administrative districts of the polity (fig. 5).³⁶ The 18 pre-

³⁵ Cf. Killen 2008, 189f.

³⁶ Pylos was administratively divided into two Provinces, separated by the Aigaleon mountain range that crosses the Messenian plain in a north-south direction. The Hither Province (*de-we-ro-a₃-ko-ra-i-ja*) incorporated about nine major district capitals, including the palatial centre itself, whereas the

served Ma tablets are characteristic of the laconic and condensed administrative language used by the Mycenaean scribes, who included in their texts only the minimum information necessary for this apparently very important economic operation: the name of the taxed region, the six commodities that were expected in a standard and repetitive order, and occasionally an exemption (*o-u-di-do-si*) granted to certain groups within these districts for the ‘current’ (PY Ma 225), or the ‘next year’ (PY Ma 365), or occasionally a debt that is still owed from the previous administrative year (*pe-ru-si-nu-wo o-pe-ro*). The surviving Ma records seem to come from two chronologically separated stages (probably a difference of only some months), with most of them containing the annual assessment of the six commodities in a fixed ratio to each other and irrespective of local ecological factors. Few tablets of this group record the actual deliveries of the expected goods and materials (*a-pu-do-si*), all of which seem to contain certain shortfalls (*o-pe-ro*, or *o*) in the payments of at least some of the expected commodities (fig. 6).³⁷

Ma 124	(S90 H 2)
.1	a-pu ₂ -we *146 23 RI M 23 KE M 7 *152 10 O M 5 ME 500
.2	o-da-a ₂ , ka-ke-we, o-u-di-do-si *146 1 RI M 1 *152 1 ME 20
	.1 PUNCT after 7
	.2 1 after *146 corrected from 2 or even from 3; *152 1: for theoretical 3/7, cf. Ma 221.1
Ma 222	(S90 H 2)
.1	a-ke-re-wa *146 23 RI M 23 KE M 7 *152 10 O M 5 ME 500
.2	a-pu-do-si *146 10 o 13 RI M 22 o M 1 KE M 7 *152 8 o 2 O M 5 ME 500 [
	Nail mark on margin below 7 of line 2

Fig. 6: Examples of two Ma taxation records: an assessment record for the town of *a-pu₂* (above) and a delivery record with the amounts of received goods and the relative shortfalls (*o*) from the town of *a-ke-re-wa* (below).

Nevertheless, there are also indications that the broad three-tiered system described above was not the only operational scheme employed during this period. For example, in the case of flax production we see that the Pylian administrators worked directly with the flax-producing regions of the polity, bypassing the respective second-order centres, and on many other occasions the palace bureaucracy directly assessed and handled the contributions and/or exemptions of individuals in various

Further Province (*pe-ra₃-ko-ra-i-ja*) consisted of seven or eight major capital towns. Both provinces incorporated many smaller towns, villages or hamlets, some of which are mentioned on the Pylian tablets (Shelmerdine 2008, 133).

³⁷ Killen 1984a; Palaima 2001, 156f.; Palaima 2004, 292–295.

locales on the basis of their land-holding status without resorting to mediating parties.³⁸

From textual references we know that certain titled officials (e.g. *ko-re-te*, *po-ro-ko-re-te*, *o-pi-da-mi-jo*) located in the various towns of the polity were, for example, responsible for the collection of bronze to be recycled into weapons (PY Jn 829), and/or for the fattening of pigs for ritual sacrifice and consumption (PY Cn 608) and their attribution to the domain of the palace.³⁹ These local representatives were probably the main intermediaries between the central administration and the outlying regions, the ‘mediating’ party that represented the palace authority and ensured that each community met its obligations towards the centre. The palace probably relied on these agents for its regular interaction with the communities, groups and individuals under its administrative jurisdiction. Another class of individuals, who also appear to have played a significant role in the economic-productive sphere of the Mycenaean states (at least at Knossos and Pylos) are the so-called ‘collectors’ or ‘owners’, although they do not seem to have operated as official representatives of the palatial authority.⁴⁰ These individuals, who are always mentioned by their personal names and not by an official title, were probably members of the ruling elite, involved in some capacity in the polity’s industrial production—not without personal benefits.⁴¹ Especially in the case of Knossos, they frequently appear in association with flocks of sheep (which were exploited primarily for their wool) and with textile working groups (which were employed in the textile industry), and their reach seems to have extended across a wide region, more so as the distance from the palatial centre increased. However, how the whole administrative procedure was carried out, coordinated, and communicated through this complex web of individuals, officials, and inter-connected parties remains ‘off the record’.

Literacy in Mycenaean times was apparently restricted to a small class of palace bureaucrats who used inscribed documentation very selectively and for a limited audience that included themselves and/or their close associates within the restricted circuit of administrators at each palatial centre.⁴² Writing was primarily employed for texts that served as temporary mnemonic records, which would facilitate the recalling of information that their writers themselves would need to check or review later, rather than as self-explanatory texts for the unknowable reader. As Palaima and others have correctly emphasised, Mycenaean culture was primarily oral, presenting a rather ‘narrow cultural attitude’ towards the practice and exercise of writing, while

³⁸ Killen 2008, 166–170; Palaima 2001, 154.

³⁹ Palaima 2001, 155; Palaima 2004, 270ff.; Shelmerdine 2008, 131–134.

⁴⁰ At least twenty-five ‘collectors’ have been identified at Knossos and four at Pylos (Shelmerdine 2008, 132). For a detailed discussion on ‘collectors’, see Bennet 1992; Carlier 1992; Driessen 1992; Godart 1992; Killen 1995; Olivier 2001; Rougemont 2001.

⁴¹ Bennet 2007, 194–200; Driessen 1999, 207.

⁴² Driessen 1994–1995; Driessen 2000; Palaima 2004, 291f.; Palaima 2011, 71.

displaying a “considerable reliance on traditional transactional arrangements that may never have been recorded in writing”.⁴³ Before the emergence of writing in the Aegean, and even prior to the appearance of the palatial institution on Crete, economic transactions and communication between interacting parties were executed orally or through sphragistic means (seals and sealings).⁴⁴ Even with the advent of the Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A written administrations, a large part of everyday business was probably still carried out without employing written records; there was always an interface between orality and literacy in place, with one form of communication supplementing the other, rather than completely replacing it.⁴⁵ This was also most likely the case during the period of the Linear B administration.

One example of the oral form of communication is offered by tablet PY Ep 704, on which is recorded, in passing, a dispute over the nature of a landholding between the priestess *Eritha* and the public council (*damos*). This two-line phrase reads: “the priestess *Eritha* holds and claims to hold *etonijo* land for the god, but the *damos* says that she holds a parcel of *kekemena ktaina*”.⁴⁶ Much information is left out, because this text is not a legal document, but its purpose—as far as the administrators were concerned—was to calculate the contributions due to the palace on the basis of the type and size of an individual’s land holding. In any case, the wording clearly attests to the oral component of communication (*claims, says*) which, although it remains tacit in the record-keeping process, was presumably the main vehicle through which information was transmitted and gathered, before finding its way into the written records (some of it, at least).⁴⁷

Writing in Mycenaean administration was thus employed to keep track of the flow of complex information, pertaining to the flow of resources from the several regions of the polity to the palatial centre and out again. Although writing as a technological feat enables words, ideas, information and the like to be transmitted unchanged across time and space, as well as to be maintained for a longer term than human memory, it seems that on the whole the Mycenaean bureaucracy did not care to take full advantage of these characteristics of writing.⁴⁸ Communication at a polity level was probably not accomplished via inscribed tablets, but most likely through non-textual means (e.g. travelling officials) or through the use of sealing devices. As

⁴³ Palaima 2001, 154; cf. Palaima 1987a; Palaima 2004, 282; Pluta 2011, 29ff.

⁴⁴ Driessen 1994–1995.

⁴⁵ Palaima 2004a, 289; Pluta 2011.

⁴⁶ The ‘land-holding’ series of Pylos (Ea, Eb, Eo, En, Ep) offers invaluable evidence for the distinction between types of land, its ownership and the accompanying formal obligations of each type of land for its holders or lessees. *Etonijo* land, in particular, was exempt from taxes, whereas *ke-ke-me-na* are communal land-holdings of standard cultivable land, liable for taxes and perhaps other obligations (Shelmerdine 2008, 134).

⁴⁷ Pluta 2011, 18f.

⁴⁸ Driessen 1994–1995; Vanstiphout 1995.

mentioned above, communication is an interpersonal procedure that requires that the parties involved share the same communicative channels. Although in general, written media are ideal communicative devices, Linear B texts did not seem to have functioned as such, despite the fact that they certainly reflect processes where communication is a *conditio sine qua non*; but our clay tablets do not seem to have been the means by which communication at a macro-level was achieved. In a largely illiterate population, written records could communicate messages within only a small circle of literate administrators, while other modes or media of communication (e.g., face-to-face interaction, oral transmission and sphragistic practices) probably performed this service at a wider level between the central administration and its subjects.⁴⁹ As has already been mentioned, Linear B documentation is contextually restricted to the palatial centres of the period, and the Linear B texts are heavily biased towards the recording of only certain and regularly undertaken operations, rather than *ad hoc* transactions.⁵⁰ However, as many studies have shown, there were many more transactions that were left unrecorded, apparently handled through different channels of communication and interaction.⁵¹

Although no systematic petrographic analysis has been made to determine the exact origin of the clay from which Linear B tablets were moulded at any Mycenaean centre, from present evidence it seems that clay tablets did not travel across regions: they were written, filed and stored in the palatial complexes, containing information exclusively for ‘internal’ consumption by the central administrators.⁵² That the Linear B clay tablets—the favoured text-bearing artefact in the Linear B administration—did not travel at an intra- or inter-regional level is suggested by the absence of documents at the second-order centres, as well as by the absence of in-text references to such practices.⁵³ What apparently travelled within the polity were several types of nodules and sealings, accompanying commodities, goods, materials and livestock coming

⁴⁹ Driessen 1999; Palaima 2003.

⁵⁰ A word of caution: this picture could be revised by future studies, when systematic excavations will be conducted in more of the so-called ‘second-order’ centres. At present, there are very few systematic investigations at sites that may have constituted secondary or tertiary centres. Unfortunately, it must always be kept in mind that, even if such records existed in these centres, they would only be recovered if the buildings containing them were destroyed by a severe conflagration.

⁵¹ See note 18 above.

⁵² No evidence for the existence of bilateral documentation has been found, nor any inscribed documents in the possession of ‘private’ or ‘non-palatial’ agents/households that could be considered as proof of conduct (Palaima 2011, 108–110; Steele 2008).

⁵³ The new tablet from the site of Iklaina at Messenia has provided important new insights into the workings of the Mycenaean administration at Messenia at an early stage, since for the first time an administrative tablet has been found at a second-order centre and not at a central palace site. However, the chronological separation between the tablet from Iklaina and those from Pylos (see note 7 above) does not provide firm grounds for a synchronic comparison and reconstruction of the regional system there (yet).

from outside the immediate environs of the palatial centres; these probably constituted the basic level in the information-gathering process.⁵⁴

Particularly revealing for the mobility of sealing devices are the approximately 56 inscribed nodules that were discovered at Thebes in Boeotia. These seem to record the deliveries of individual animals from outlying regions to the palatial centre of Thebes on the occasion of some sort of commensal banqueting event that probably involved the sacrifice and consumption of the delivered animals.⁵⁵ The technical vocabulary on these nodules recurs on certain tablets of the Un series from Pylos and the C(2) series from Knossos, which, among others, also contain entries of animals that were probably destined to be sacrificed and consumed in a banqueting ceremony.⁵⁶ The association between these two classes of documents suggests that nodules, such as the TH Wu, functioned as preliminary notations of deliveries of livestock and other commodities, whose entries were subsequently passed to leaf-shaped or rectangular tablets that listed miscellaneous provisions.⁵⁷

The fact that sealing devices were portable and mobile at an intra-regional level, and thus were components of a more extended intra-polity system than the clay tablets, is also suggested by the fact that, whether inscribed or not, nodules and sealings most commonly bore a seal-impression. Seals and sealings had a long tradition of use in the prehistoric Aegean as material artefacts that marked identity and ownership, safeguarded the integrity of transactions, sealed containers of goods and authenticated interpersonal economic affairs.⁵⁸ On the other hand, and contrary to Near Eastern practices, Linear B tablets were never impressed with a seal-impression, nor were they signed with identifying signatures and marks of any form that would indicate an authorisation of a particular transaction, or the authentication of an operation by a cross-checking bureaucrat.⁵⁹ What would explain the presence of seal-impressions on nodules and sealings, and their absence on clay tablets, is that the latter had a more limited 'public' exposure, being confined to a select circle of individuals who participated in a closed and locally-structured administrative system that did not require cross-checking for authorisation or authentication of conduct for the 'officially' recorded operations on the clay documents. Since clay tablets did not move beyond a specific circle of individuals, nor across distances, legitimisation of the transaction was probably afforded by the action of writing itself, and authentication was possibly deemed superfluous since the scribes were likely personally involved in carrying out the specific recorded operations (see below).

⁵⁴ Driessen 1999; Palaima 2000.

⁵⁵ Piteros et al. 1990.

⁵⁶ Killen 1992, 1994.

⁵⁷ Driessen 1999; Palaima 2000; Perna 2011.

⁵⁸ Cf. Driessen 1994–1995; Hallager 1996; Palaima 1987b; Palaima 1990; Palaima 1994; Palaima 1996.

⁵⁹ Palaima 2003, 173f.; Palaima 2011, 96.

Nevertheless, there is a single tablet from Knossos that is thought to provide potential evidence for the existence of some form of written communication between the central administration and its outlying regions. On KN C 5753, which was found in the palace at Knossos, the form *ko-no-so-de* appears; it is an allative case that denotes destination ('to Knossos'), indicating movement *towards* the palatial centre. Some scholars have argued that this tablet—written by a scribe who is concerned with economic issues in West Crete—attests to the existence of a “written communication not only from Knossos to these sites but also from these areas to Knossos”.⁶⁰ However, this is a single and doubtful case to confirm the existence of regular intra-island written communication that involved ‘travelling’ tablets, since the allative—*de* could have been transcribed unchanged from the delivered nodule that most likely accompanied the thirteen cattle recorded on KN C 5753 as coming ‘to Knossos’—besides, the same allative form (*te-qa-de*) also appears on the Wu Theban nodules.⁶¹

Thus, from pinacological, textual, palaeographical and contextual observations it becomes apparent that the Linear B record-keeping process was organised, at the micro-level, in a two- or three-stage system. The elementary role in the information-gathering process was often played by the various sealing devices which functioned as the authorising/authenticating documents in the basic transactions between parties.⁶² Although in the Linear B system such devices were used less—compared to the earlier Linear A practices—on some occasions they seem to have maintained their original function as “recording instruments within transactions that did not require the use of writing”.⁶³ On other occasions, they probably assumed the role of the ‘primary’ document, whose information (varying in subject, as shown at least in the case of the inscribed tablets) found its way onto the leaf-shaped tablets before passing on to the summary page-shaped ones.⁶⁴ Some scholars argue that the final stage in the Mycenaean record-keeping process would have been the transcription of information for longer-term storage (what we would call ‘archival material’) onto text-bearing objects that were probably perishable and did not survive the fires that hit the Mycenaean centres, like papyrus or parchment.⁶⁵ Although it is a very reasonable assumption, material traces of this practice have yet to be recovered.

The practice of writing and reading was apparently restricted during the Mycenaean period, utilised mostly by a certain class of the population (those we call ‘scribes’), and even within the palace chain of command it is highly possible that not all administrators were literate, or at least not all handled their assigned duties exclu-

⁶⁰ Rehak/Younger 2001, 453.

⁶¹ Driessen 2000, 37 and note 48; Killen 1996, 78f.

⁶² Cf. Driessen 1999, 209; Palaima 1987b; Palaima 1996; Palaima 2000; Piteros et al. 1990.

⁶³ Palaima 2003, 174, italics in original.

⁶⁴ Cf. Driessen 1999, 207f.; Olivier 1997; Palaima 1996; Palaima 2000.

⁶⁵ Driessen 1994–1995, 244ff.; Palaima 2003, 171; contra Bennet 2001, 27; Perna 2011.

sively through writing.⁶⁶ Palaeographic studies of individual handwriting styles at all sites where inscribed documents have been found estimate a relatively small number of different ‘tablet-writers’: for Knossos, about 50 primary hands and 27 secondary hands (for all chronologically separated deposits); for Pylos, a number between 25 and 33; about 22 hands at Thebes (12 on the tablets and about 10 for the inscribed sealings); and 14 different hands at Mycenae.⁶⁷ The relatively low number of identified scribes at any one palatial centre—even for the relatively short time-span to which the Linear B assemblages belong—as well as the absence of any in-text reference for ‘tablet-writers’ in general has suggested to scholars that Mycenaean scribes did not constitute a separate class of specialised administrative personnel, as in Egypt and the Near East. Mycenaean scribes were probably literate officials, ‘agents’ themselves of the palatial bureaucracy, who had a selective commitment to the practice of writing in the daily performance of administrative duties—most likely those assignments that could not be handled through oral arrangements, on-the-spot physical presence, or simple sphragistic means, nor could they be maintained in memory, or easily recalled via simple notation or tallying devices.⁶⁸ The likelihood that Mycenaean scribes were literate officials, who did not exhaust their duties in the writing of Linear B texts, but were most likely also personally engaged in the transactions they recorded—probably through personal inspection in the polity’s hinterlands and vis-à-vis interaction with extra-palatial parties—would also explain the low average output in the production of inscribed documents (even for the most prolific of them),⁶⁹ as well as the feature of intra-scribal recurrences of similar personal names.⁷⁰ Palaeographic studies have long drawn attention to the high degree of scribal specialisation, especially at Knossos and less at Pylos,⁷¹ which, coupled with prosopographical analyses of the large number of personal names (from low status labourers to high-status individuals), would suggest that certain scribes were in direct contact with the persons whose names they recorded on the tablets, and could identify them by personal name only, without any other distinguishing qualifications (e.g. patronymics, place-names).

⁶⁶ Cf. Weingarten 1997.

⁶⁷ Palaima 2011, 71 and note 74; see note 19 above for the main palaeographic studies.

⁶⁸ Cf. Bennet 2001; Chadwick 1976, 20; Driessen 1994–1995; Driessen 2000, 230f.; Palaima 2004a, 289; Palaima 2011, 121ff.

⁶⁹ Palaima 2003, 176f.; Palaima 2011, 300f.

⁷⁰ Landenius-Enegren 2005; Nakassis 2013; Olivier 1997.

⁷¹ Scribes have been categorised as ‘specialised’, ‘semi-specialised’ and ‘non-specialised’, based on their degree of involvement in the various administrative operations. Those characterised as ‘specialised’ worked on a single aspect of a single administrative branch, those ‘semi-specialised’ were engaged with more than one aspect of a single branch and those ‘non-specialised’ were dealing with multiple themes at various branches of the economic-productive sphere. At Knossos 44 fully-specialised, 14 semi-specialised and 4 non-specialised hands have been identified, whereas at Pylos there were 6 fully-specialised, 6 semi-specialised and 11 non-specialised hands (Shelmerdine 1988; Shelmerdine 1999).

Nevertheless, the fact that Mycenaean scribes were not just ‘tablet-writers’ (i.e. not only specialised in this one administrative skill), nor exclusively devoted to the practice of writing in the daily performance of their duties, does not in any way diminish the competence with which they produced their writing media and inscriptions, or their ingenuity in dealing with multiple (and often changing) incoming and outgoing information, or their ability to adapt their clay tablets and format their texts to suit the occasion and meet the requirements ‘of the moment’.⁷² Although no evidence for scribal education has been yet uncovered, what we call ‘scribal practices’ in Linear B administrative practice present remarkable consistency and uniformity throughout its attested history, despite the variations observed in the different Mycenaean bureaucracies and in the habits of individual scribes.⁷³

4 Linear B Administrative Script: the Medium *and* the Message

As mentioned above, the preserved Linear B texts belong to only one genre: they are strictly *internal* administrative documents that register economic-managerial operations and transactions, involving the procurement of raw materials, goods, and various types of foodstuffs that were subsequently channelled to the various spheres of palatial economic interest. No literary texts, poetic compositions, mythical or legendary narratives, private accounts, diplomatic or other correspondence or the like have survived from this period, thus launching a controversy among scholars over whether such genres did not exist in a written form during this period, or did exist and were destroyed by accidents of preservation.⁷⁴

Some scholars cite the very nature of the syllabic system as the primary reason for the absence of multivariate genres in Linear B. A syllabic script, they argued, cannot render the Greek language efficiently—as the later Greek alphabet was able to—thus failing to adequately accommodate the phonetically-complex language that poetry, verses or hymns would require, or the semantic precision and unambiguity that laws or diplomatic correspondence would necessitate.⁷⁵ They also considered the difficulty in learning the syllabic system—since it had more signs than any alphabetic script—as a reason for the limited literacy observed in the Mycenaean world, its restriction to

⁷² See Palaima 2011, for various examples.

⁷³ Driessen 2000; Pluta 2011, 49ff.

⁷⁴ Palaima 1987a; Perna 2011.

⁷⁵ Coulmas 2003, 82; Rix 1992, 27; Sampson 1985, 66ff.

a confined circle of palace bureaucrats, and even the reason for its eventual demise with the collapse of the Mycenaean palatial institutions.⁷⁶

Although it is true that there are indeed some ‘misfits’ between the Linear B syllabic script and the later attested Greek language,⁷⁷ nevertheless a script by itself does not facilitate or hinder the spread of literacy, or the practice of learning to read and write; social conditions, political directives and ideological parameters within a specific social and political context do. Literacy is not a ‘neutral’ technology, with inherent qualities, uses and consequences irrespective of its performed context; it is essentially a social practice that is embedded in a particular historical environment and as such it is inextricably bound to the historical, cultural and contextual setting(s) in which it is used.⁷⁸ In our context, only a small circle of individuals attached to the workings of the central administration was probably literate, in the sense that they had the responsibility and training to write and read the Linear B inscriptions. The fact that literacy, or the knowledge and practice of writing, was not widespread during the LBA on Crete and the mainland was not due to the difficulties or weaknesses that a syllabic system poses, but due to the political and social environment that either obstructed such knowledge from becoming a common *topos*, or did not require its use in the broader social and economic spheres and the everyday conduct of affairs. In the same vein, a script by itself is not *intrinsically* suited for specific purposes and unsuited for others. The complexity or simplicity of a writing system cannot indicate by itself whether it was, or is, or can be employed for a wide array of communicative purposes or for a restricted one; logosyllabic scripts across the planet have been used not only for making up simple accounting lists, but also for writing poetry, mythical narratives and several types of literary genres, while some alphabetic scripts were never used to create complex literature.⁷⁹

From present evidence it seems that Linear B script was, from its inception, a system created, developed and used *for* and *within* the framework of a bureaucratic organisation that served particular economic interests and operations; its aim was not to accommodate spoken language (and/or poetic verse), but to provide a tool to enable the institution to control and manage accounting information.⁸⁰ In this sense, the efficiency of the script itself and its ability to accommodate further uses should be examined with reference to its particular scope and not our understanding and

⁷⁶ Dow 1968.

⁷⁷ For example, the open-syllabic character of the Linear B script does indeed require, when transliterated into Greek, the frequent use of dummy vowels, the inclusion of consonants at the end of syllables, additions of phonemes, etc. Linear B does not contain evolved labiovelars: although it distinguishes between voiced and unvoiced dentals (*d-* and *t-*), it does not distinguish between voiced and unvoiced labials, or velars (cf. Bartoněk 2003).

⁷⁸ Cf. Clanchy 1993; Street 1984.

⁷⁹ Cf. Pluta 2011, 34; Powell 1991; Powell 2012.

⁸⁰ Powell 1991, 181; Powell 2012, 3ff.

expectations of what a written system can or could do. Besides, Linear B was not the sole communicative system in play during the Mycenaean period, even for the practice of administrative management and control. Oral communication and traditional ways of handling information and conducting inter-personal transactions with sealing devices were still in use, working alongside the written documentation rather than being totally supplanted by it.⁸¹

In fact, what is argued here is that any presumed textual ambiguity in the Linear B tablets from the point of view of modern scholars was not necessarily seen as ambiguous by its original handlers. The standardisation in the language and the restricted transactional vocabulary, the consistency in certain document types and their formatting, even the archaeological context in which tablets were temporarily placed or stored, all of these would not only offer invaluable clues as to their character and purposes, but also facilitate and enable the unambiguous interpretation of their contents by their ‘handlers’ and/or ‘readers’.

5 The Medium: Clay Tablets

Clay was the material *par excellence* for the Linear B record-keeping process, although accidents of preservation leave us to wonder whether other, more perishable materials were also used as carriers of texts during this period.⁸² Although no material evidence has survived that would indicate the use of other media (papyrus, leather, parchment) during this period, it has been suggested that the cursive style of the signs, which was never considerably simplified to less curvilinear lines (which would be more easily inscribed on the moist clay), indirectly suggests that softer materials than clay were used for the application of writing throughout the life of the Linear B script.⁸³ In any case, clay tablets seem to have been the preferable medium for administrative purposes, and the choice of material was as much characteristic as it was constitutive of the system.

Clay is a well-suited material for record-keeping because its sources can be found literally everywhere in the Aegean, its extraction and manipulation are readily avail-

⁸¹ Palaima 2004a; Pluta 2011.

⁸² There is a single type of clay sealing (the so-called ‘flat-based nodule’) which was commonly used during the period of the Linear A administration and which preserves evidence for the use of softer, more perishable materials for writing during the Neopalatial period on Crete (Hallager 1996, 135ff.). However, this particular type is only present (with only a handful of examples) in the early Linear B deposit at Knossos (Room of Chariot Tablets), after which it totally disappears; its use did not survive during the period of the Linear B administration on Crete and on the Greek mainland (Driessen 2000, 223; Perna 2011).

⁸³ Cf. Palaima 2003, 171; Palaima 2011, 116; Pluta 2011, 53f.; but Perna 2011.

able to and easily handled by everyone, it can be maintained ready for use as long as it is kept moist, and when dried it can be stored in a dry environment and kept for a very long time, or when baked it can survive almost indefinitely. Since moist clay is easily malleable by hands and relatively simple instruments, it can easily afford any size, shape, length and general dimension its user would require. It can be shaped, cut, reconfigured, squeezed or extended to accommodate even *ad hoc* decisions and unanticipated circumstances. Furthermore, if it is not baked at high temperatures but only sun-dried, it can be easily recycled and reused by immersing it in water, hand-moulding and re-softening its surface to accommodate the new text—a practice that Mycenaean scribes took particular advantage of.

The Linear B signs were inscribed with the use of a sharp stylus on clay tablets that were left to dry naturally and were not intentionally fired.⁸⁴ There are two basic types of clay tablets of varying sizes: the so-called ‘page-shaped’ and the oblong ‘leaf-shaped’, with another intermediary ‘rectangular-shaped’ type (fig. 7).⁸⁵ The clay tablets of any size and format were generally devised to be held in the palm of one hand, while writing with the other. The preference for any specific type, or its intermediate variations, depended on the type of text that needed recording, as well as on the scribe’s idiosyncrasies and *ad hoc* responses and solutions to the challenges of recording information in the most effective and economical way.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, as a general rule the oblong leaf-shaped tablets accommodated a single line or a few lines of text, running parallel to the long sides of the tablet, and were used for single transactions or individual recordings of larger bureaucratic operations. The larger format of the page-shaped tablets accommodated inscriptions in multiple lines (either arranged in columns or paragraphs), and thus were mostly used to register many entries involving a large number of individuals or localities, or to summarise complex information that was originally contained on the single leaf-shaped tablets. Tablets that dealt with the same subject matter usually formed sets that were placed inside wicker containers or baskets and were systematically filed together in the tablet-storage areas.⁸⁷

Another category of documents where Linear B inscriptions are found are the so-called ‘labels’ and ‘sealings/nodules’, both of which were small lumps of clay, moulded by hand, and which either labelled or sealed boxes containing relevant

84 Such writing implements (‘styluses’) have been found at Thebes and Tiryns. All of the few recovered specimens have one sharp pointed edge (the writing point) and another blunt end that was apparently used for erasures and corrections (Palaima 2011, 111).

85 This categorisation is, of course, conventional and is based on the relative length of the horizontal and vertical axis: the page-shaped have longer vertical sides than horizontal, the leaf-shaped a longer horizontal than vertical and the rectangular have relatively more proportional vertical and horizontal sides.

86 Cf. Palaima 2011, 67ff., 84f., 104f.

87 See note 20 above.

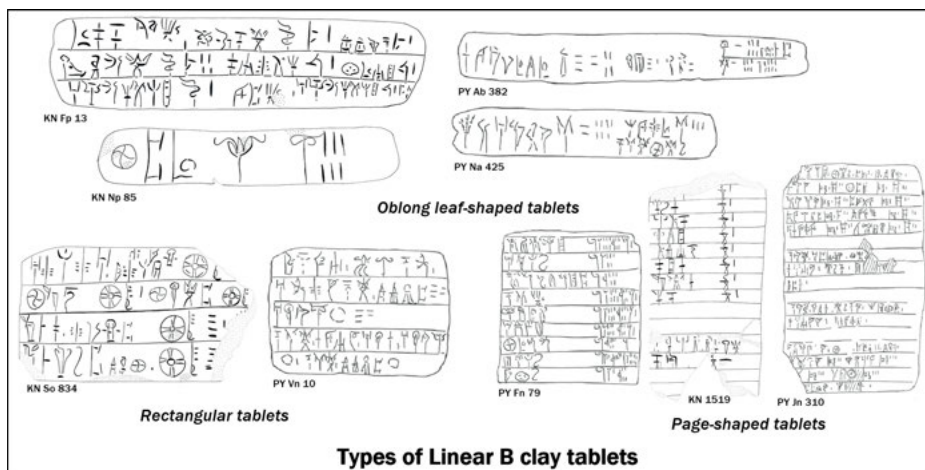


Fig. 7: Examples of Linear B inscribed tablets (after Bennett 1955 and Chadwick *et al.* 1986).

sets of Linear B tablets (the ‘labels’), or accompanied incoming goods or already-deposited commodities in the palace storerooms (‘sealings/nodules’).⁸⁸ A third class of Linear B inscriptions consists of painted Linear B sign-groups on clay vessels, most particularly on stirrup jars, a typical ceramic vessel of the LH III period that was preferred as a container of exportable/transportable liquid commodities, such as olive oil.⁸⁹ Besides clay tablets, sealings and stirrup jars, Linear B inscriptions are barely attested on other materials, with only a handful of exceptions.⁹⁰

Despite the fact that Linear B tablets were apparently short-term documents functioning more as ‘aides-mémoire’ within an annual administrative cycle rather than detailed records for the long term, the care that the scribes displayed—from the preparation of the writing surface and the formatting of the physical object that would host the inscription (i.e. the tablet), to the methodical laying out of the text on it—is indicative of their intention to produce a document easily accessible at a glance. The writing surface is smoothed and straightened to best accommodate the writing process, then

⁸⁸ Perna 2011.

⁸⁹ Painted inscriptions in Linear B are found on ca. 160 stirrup jars from approximately five sites on Crete (Armenoi, Khania, Knossos, Malia and Monastiraki), and seven sites on the Greek mainland (Eleusis, Kreusis, Midea, Mycenae, Orchomenos, Thebes and Tiryns) (Van Alfen 2008).

⁹⁰ Only a handful of exceptions to this rule have been discovered until now: a fragmentary inscription on a stone block from Iolkos (IOL Zh 1), and a sealstone from a tomb in Medeon incised with three or four Linear B signs (MED Zg 1). Furthermore, a few incised/painted Linear B sign-groups have been found on a few clay vessels (not stirrup-jars) that may represent a form of ‘private’ use of the script, even though most of the surviving specimens were recovered from palatial contexts (Pluta 2011, 88, 95–114).

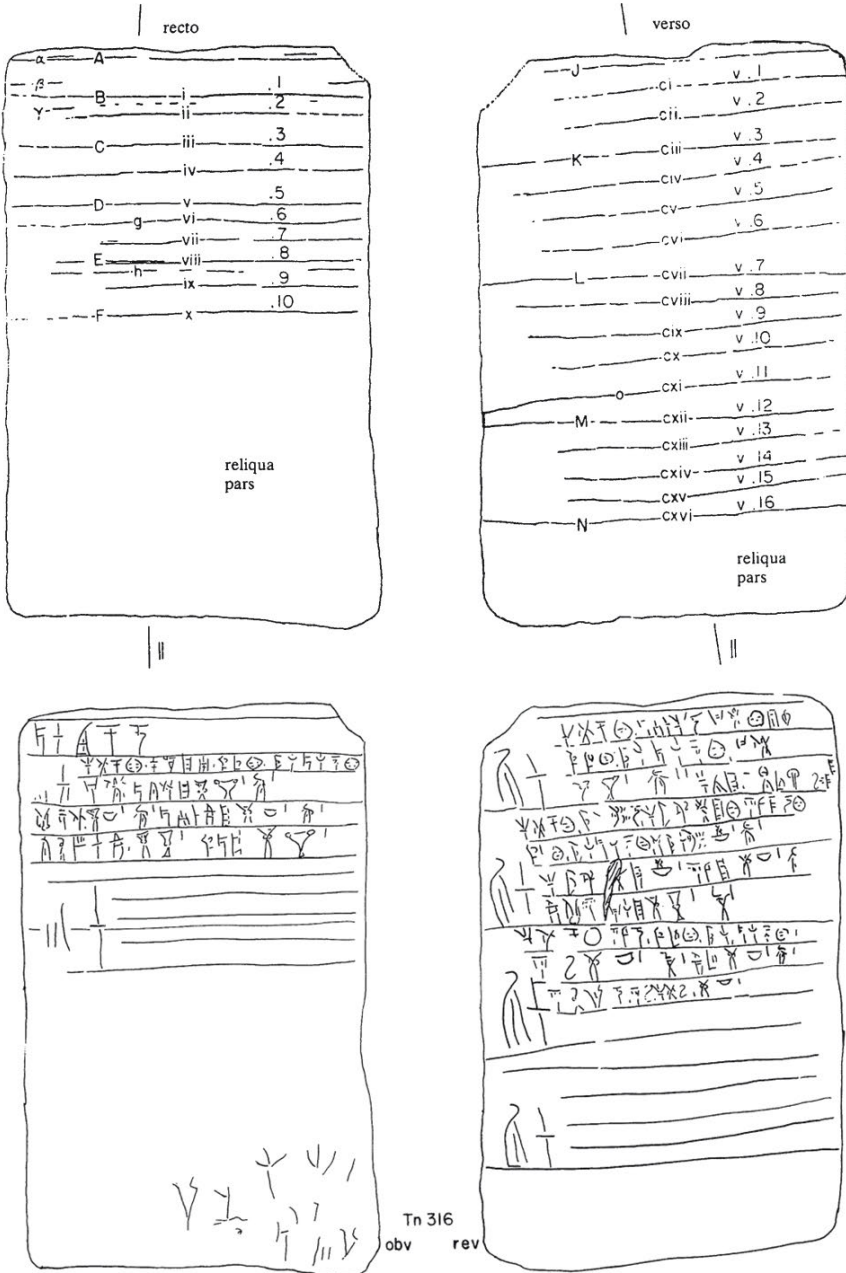


Fig. 8: PY Tn 316: above, the pinacological analysis of the sectioning and ruling of the tablet before its writing; below, facsimile of the finished text (both by Emmett Bennett, Jr., after Palaima 2011, figs.12.18–12.17 respectively).

ruled with equally-sized straight lines before committing to the actual writing of the inscription (fig. 8). Then the text is laid out in a clear and orderly arrangement: there is often a heading, clarifying the purpose and/or the occasion for the compilation of the record, then the entries are arranged in discrete sets that are regularly punctuated, or when the information is extensive and composite it is formatted in columns, *stoichedon* entries and/or paragraphs, with the metric units and numbers standing out as they consistently occupy the end of each separate registry (fig. 9). Occasionally the excessive clay, or pieces left empty of text were removed, either to create a separate tablet/record, or for the most economical record-storage (e.g. PY Fn 79).⁹¹ Thus, overall the appearance of the Linear B documents affords an orderly presentation that corresponds aptly to a quick and easy consultation of its contents for its intended audience.

However, the medium is never separate from its message and communicative purpose, as much as the latter is never unbound from its material bearer.

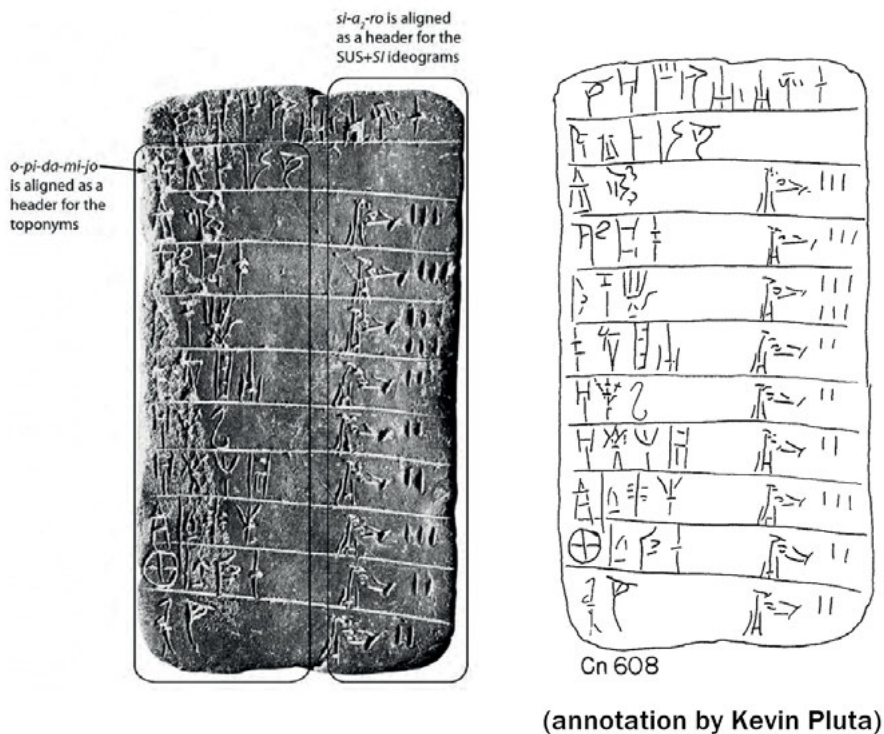


Fig. 9: PY Cn 608: left, the layout of text in columns, preceded by a heading (annotation by Kevin Pluta, in Palaima 2011, fig. 12.39); right, the facsimile of the same tablet (after Palaima 2011, fig. 12.40).

⁹¹ Palaima 2011, 79ff.; Tomas 2013.

6 The Message: Linear B as Administrative Language

Alphabetic users, as we are, tend to assume that writing is a graphic representation of spoken words and utterances and as such it constitutes a form of ‘frozen language’. However, this is not necessarily the case for all scripts and all periods; in fact, the earliest writing systems—and not only those—never aspired to codify the spoken language, or to convey a written version of an otherwise oral message.⁹² Writing is certainly a means of communication, but it is not always required to conform accurately to the oral performance of language and speech in order to do so. Logo-syllabic systems, too, did not intend to convey spoken language with accurate phonetic pronunciation—as alphabetic scripts do—but this does not mean that it restricted their ability to accurately communicate messages in a written form.⁹³ Furthermore, *administrative* writing itself—irrespective of the type of script it employs—most commonly reduces the linguistic or lexical components that it uses to the minimum, striving to convey the required messages in the most *economical* way rather than the most grammatically and syntactically *complete* one. Administrative language and administrative documents do not need grammar and syntax as literary texts, laws, or correspondence may; they rely on different formulas and graphic devices that do not necessarily represent the sequence of the spoken language, while still managing to deliver the desired effect. In this sense, when assessing the validity and communicative quality of the Linear B script according to whether or not it renders the spoken Greek language efficiently (by our standards), or whether it was ‘good enough’ for listing items and accounting but not for other uses, we unjustifiably overlook the purposes for which it was used and the contexts within which it was employed, while failing to critically reflect on our own preconceptions and biased training in alphabetic writing.

Thus, putting aside our own preconceptions and approaching the Linear B tablets and texts for exactly what they are and what they aspired to do (i.e. accounting documents within a restricted sphere populated by an administrative personnel well-acquainted with the overall bureaucratic system), we can more clearly see how the script was employed and how the documents managed to convey the desired messages by exploiting the linguistic *and* extra- or para-linguistic elements at the same time. In fact, it is here argued that any potential ambiguity that the lexigraphic writing may have allowed for was successfully compensated by reference to para-linguistic elements—for example, physical form and presentation and graphical devices.

In administrative documents, the main concern is to render a text legible and comprehensible in the most economical way, which usually means to reduce the lexical components to the bare minimum—a practice that we also employ in our modern

⁹² Cf. Michalowski 1990; Larsen 1988.

⁹³ Cf. Powell 1991, 71ff.

administrative documents. The interpretation of the condensed text and its purpose is elucidated and facilitated by the use of non-linguistic devices: for example, the layout of the medium on which writing is applied (the material and its quality, e.g. art paper, cardboard, coated or recycled paper, metallic foil, stone, etc.); the format of the surface in boxes, columns, sub-columns, paragraphs, rows and the like; word-division and auxiliary marks; the accentuation of ‘important’ words through increase in sign size, underlining, bold characters, etc.; the use of semantic indicators; and essentially, the very context in which the inscribed text is produced and deposited.⁹⁴ It can thus be argued that what, on a literary text, is practically achieved through the use of continuous writing that conforms to certain grammatical and syntactical rules in order to communicate the desired message, on administrative texts is basically achieved through format and context: format renders the text and its contents legible by ordering—most commonly in a standardised fashion—the relatively limited linguistic components with the non-linguistic or graphic elements in meaningful associations within the provided space, thus clarifying the meaning and interrelationship between the various distinct registries.

Linear B administrative script does exactly that.⁹⁵ Textual economy and legibility is achieved at the interface between the format of the clay medium (the tablet), the standardisation of the textual layout, the application of the lexical and ideographic signs, and the particular setting of the institutional/palatial context within which the writing took place. The different types of tablets are consistently used for particular operations and transactions (see above), and the afforded qualities of the material medium are exploited as much as they direct the textual format by which the inscription is arranged on the physical writing surface. The most efficient rendering of the recorded information is achieved through, among other things, the use of acrophonic abbreviations (i.e. the recording of the first syllable of the word/item that is registered), or by employing a complex semantographic repertoire that combines two or more logograms into a single ‘naturalistic’ drawing, or two or more syllabograms into a single one (‘monogram’), effectively shortening the recorded text and condensing the relevant information into a minimal space.⁹⁶

However, this ‘compressed’ writing did not come at the expense of the (also desirable) clarity of information: when a phonetically rendered sign-group could have invited ambiguity, the tablet-writers always included the (unambiguous) ideographic sign of the particular item (what we generally call ‘double writing’) before recording the metric units and/or numerals that went along with it.⁹⁷ This ‘trick’ of ‘double-writ-

⁹⁴ Pluta 2011, 38ff.; Powell 1991, 74ff. A similar case has been convincingly argued for the ‘proto-cuneiform’ inscriptions, cf. Cooper 2004, 80; Green 1981; Larsen 1988.

⁹⁵ Palaima 2004b; Palaima 2005; Palaima 2011.

⁹⁶ Maurice 1985; Palaima 2005.

⁹⁷ Palaima 2005.

ing' prevented any potential ambiguities and made the contents more pronounced at a glance by including ideographic signs that stand out by virtue of their 'pictographic accuracy'. Furthermore, the grammatical component was not totally absent; verbs and adverbs are relatively infrequent, but those grammatical elements that are deemed absolutely indispensable for the full comprehension and 'decodification' of the phrase are maintained: inflection and declension are particularly pronounced: verbs and nouns agree in number and case, adjectives and nouns agree in gender, number and case (e.g. the genitive case denotes persons who are in possession of something, the accusative case reveals destination or the direct object of the verb, the dative signifies an indirect object, or the recipient/receiver of the recorded action), to name a few examples.⁹⁸

Additionally, the order according to which the text is laid out in the physical space of the tablet is also particularly revealing in its consistency and standardisation: the lexical sign-groups with a phonetic value are clearly distinct from the ideographically represented ones, appearing in exactly this sequence from the left-hand side of the tablet moving towards the left (see examples in figs. 7–9). The end of the registry, or what follows the entries of phonograms and ideograms, is occupied by the units of measurement (when applicable) and especially by the relevant numerals. Numbers always stand out, either placed at the end of a phrase or a line, or in the right-hand section of the tablet when the text is arranged in *stoichedon* format—because numbers are the most significant elements of any economic-accounting document.⁹⁹

The clear distinction, then, in the physical space of the tablet between lexical entries and ideographically represented items, and the close association of the latter with the respective metric units and numerals, clearly shows the accounting nature of the documents and significantly enhances their practicality in the bookkeeping and record-consulting process.¹⁰⁰ Any potential uncertainty in the phonetic verbalisation of a sign-group is addressed and dismissed by the standardisation of the vocabulary used, the sequence of the signs, their relative position within the physical space and their interrelation with the rest of the signs, the conventional phonetic and semantic clues that are repeatedly used and the general familiarity of the 'producers/readers' of the texts who actively partook in this system.

Thus, in the Linear B *modus operandi* there was a greater reliance on the visual arrangement of the text and its physical appearance, rather than strictly on the linguistic formulation of the text: the material form and physical format of the text-bearing medium, the graphical devices, the phonetic and ideographic representations, the elements of the language and the institutional context, all of these together in a 'symphony' rather than in 'solo' were called on to convey the desired message. In this

⁹⁸ Cf. Bartoněk 2003.

⁹⁹ Chadwick 1976, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Palaima 2003, 167.

sense, Linear B administrative texts are not completely alien to our own experience of 'official' documents: the linguistic element is restricted to the necessary minimum, but still it follows particular grammatical and syntactical rules when the textual context requires it (e.g. grammatical gender and number correspondence between nouns and adjectives), and the document becomes legible through combining these linguistic elements with the several non-linguistic conventions of the physical format of the text-bearing medium (arrangement in columns and sections, differently sized and accentuated signs, auxiliary marks, and the like) and, in particular, the context of text production and deposition (personal, private, public, official). Additionally, it should not be forgotten that the audience of the tablets most commonly corresponded to its original producers, which means that any system of notation, however abbreviated, condensed or compressed, would make perfect sense to those who were actively and personally involved not only in the production of the written text, but also with the specific circumstances that dictated it and the people who were named on it.¹⁰¹

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, we know that Linear B script was an instrument in the hand of the central institution of the time, exclusively fashioned and employed for organising, monitoring, and keeping track of economic transactions and productive operations that were of interest to the palatial ruling elites. Literacy was practically confined to the highest level of bureaucratic control and did not have a broader applicability (or perhaps utility) in the wider contemporary society. The written tablets mostly served as mnemonic records for data that their knowledgeable handlers needed to consult later, whereas the greater part of communication remained primarily oral, or was carried out by other means, most of which are not archaeologically recoverable or were soon discarded after fulfilling their role, without leaving extensive traces. All evidence from this period points to the conclusion that written documentation on clay tablets aimed to address exclusively internal administrative needs and was performed by and accessible to only a closed circle of palace officials. Within this closed system, however, the communicative potential of the script and its physical carrier were exploited as widely as, and as far as, their producers and users required to.

¹⁰¹ Palaima 2011, 72.

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Lisa Wilhelmi

Materiality and Reality of the Communication of Divine Will in the Sargonid Period*

1 Introduction

The ancient Mesopotamian world-view determined that human life on earth was inextricably intertwined with the divine, and the omnipresence of this divine element was never seriously questioned. It was beyond doubt that the plans of the gods and their wishes could be observed in all manner of celestial and terrestrial signs and events, which could be interpreted through the art of divination. The deduction of the divine will was of particular importance for the kings and rulers of Mesopotamian states throughout the ages, as they laid great emphasis on governing in accordance with the wishes of the gods, and it was understood that this was to ensure a successful reign.

Messages from the gods could manifest themselves in a myriad of forms, which can be divided into two categories: *omina oblativa* consisted of signs that could be readily observed in the environment and which foreshadowed certain events, while *omina impetrativa* were provided by the gods on request, in a substance offered to them embedded in a specific ritual. Although both types of omens held significance for the running of the state, their implications were different: while the former could only inform the ruler of impending fortune or evil, leading to counteractive measures if necessary, the latter could be used to ascertain the gods' approval or disapproval of a particular course of action.

The communication of the divine will undergoes a sequence of transmissions of information, starting with its display through an ominous event and ending with the delivery of the insights gained to the king; where deemed necessary, the revelations could be further utilised to validate or justify political and military decisions, and as such were further distributed. During these processes the materiality of the communication is not static, but changes character depending on circumstances such as the sender, recipient and aim of the transmission, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the specifics of any single communicative act are influenced by the individual correspondent.

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2 Significance of the Extrapolation of the Divine Will in the Ancient Near East

The first extant reference to the use of divinatory methods can be found in a royal inscription of Ur-Nanše of Lagaš from the 26th century BC and reflects the use of extispicy, i.e. the examination of the entrails of a sacrificial animal, usually a sheep. The text reports that the suitability of the candidate for the office of priest of the goddess Nanše was established by oracular means.¹ Although no lists of omen entries are preserved among the many texts from the third millennium BC, there is ample evidence showing that extispicy was practiced and played an important role in the conception of kingship already throughout this early period: The occupational title “extispicer”—literally “the one who extends the hand towards the sacrificial animal”—appears in Early Dynastic lists of professions from Farā and Tell Abū Šalābiḥ (ca. 26th century BC),² and rulers such as Gudea of Lagaš (2141–2122 BC)³ and Ur-namma of Ur (2112–2095 BC) praise themselves as proficient in extispicy⁴ or as ruling by its grace.⁵ Furthermore, so-called historical omens from later periods, pairing specific observations with concrete historical events from the reign of a particular king, are indicative of the use of the practice during the period of the Akkadian empire (2340–2200 BC),⁶ as are clay models of livers from Mari that contain historical references.⁷ Occasional

¹ The foundation tablet discovered in Lagaš's sister town Girsu (modern Tellōh, located in Southern Mesopotamia) reads: “nanše.ur / lugal / lagaš / ... / ur-nimin / dam- / “nanše / maš bi-pà “Ur-Nanše, the king of Lagaš, ... chose Ur-Nimin as ‘spouse’ of the god Nanše by oracular means.” (*RIME* 1.9.1.17 col. i 1–3 ... iii 3–6).

² lú-máš-šu-gíd (VAT 12619 [published in *WVDOG* 43, 47] viii 63 — ED lú C from Farā [ancient Šurup-pak, located in Southern Mesopotamia on the banks of a since dried-up tributary of the Euphrates]; AbS T 235 // AbS T 232, 130 — ED lú E from Abū Šalābiḥ [not yet securely identified with an ancient geographical name, located about 35–40 miles north of Farā on the same tributary]).

³ All dates given follow the so-called middle chronology. For an overview of the early chronology of Mesopotamia and its problems refer to Åström 1987–1989.

⁴ máš-bar₆-ra šu mu-gíd-dè / máš-a šu ì-gíd máš-a-ni ì-sa₆ “He inspected a white sacrificial animal. He inspected the sacrificial animal; his sacrificial animal (i.e. his omen) was favourable.” (Gudea Cylinder A xii 16f.; cuneiform copy: *TCL* 8 pl. xii; edition: *RIME* 3 1.1.7.CylA).

⁵ zà-mi / “en-líl-le u₄-du₁₀-du₁₀-ga-na máš-e bí-in'-pà-dè-en “Enlil appointed me in his good days by means of an oracle.” (*TCL* 15 nr. 38: 57f.)

⁶ With the exception of an apodosis alluding to the legendary king Gilgameš (*YOS* 10 42 i 2f.), which is not necessarily to be understood as reflecting historical fact, no references to rulers preceding the Akkad dynasty are preserved in the corpus (Goetze 1947, 1f.). Omens with historical references are not restricted to the extispicy series, but are also documented in the series concerning birth malformations, *Šumma izbu*, and *enūma Anu Enlil*, the astrological omen series (Goetze 1947, 1 n. 1), although further sources recording the use of these practices are lacking.

⁷ The clay models recovered at Mari (modern Tell Ḥarīrī, located on the western bank of the Euphrates in Syria, near the border with Iraq) present single findings of the liver that are indicated graphically with only the apodosis noted in writing on the reverse of the items. A number of these apodoses,

references regarding other divinatory methods in the early periods,⁸ as well as the relatively large and differentiated nature of the written corpus in place at the beginning of the second millennium BC, show that extispicy was not the sole form of divination practiced in the third millennium BC.⁹

By the Old Babylonian period, lists of omens consisting of entries of the form “if (observation), then (prediction)” have emerged and compendia of different genres of divination are attested, some of which—namely those relating to *omina impetrativa* other than extispicy—are short-lived and do not enter the so-called “stream of tradition”.¹⁰ *Omina oblativa* range from the observation of astrological and weather phenomena to the behaviour of humans and animals and the appearance of facial features, to name but a few. In the late second and early first millennium BC, the entries are consolidated, arranged and elaborated into extensive collections of a “serialised” character comprising a set number of tablets with prescribed entries, resulting in the form known best to us from Neo-Assyrian tablet finds from the capital city Nineveh, but often attested elsewhere with little deviation. The standardisation of the com-

which are generally introduced with *amūt* “liver, i.e. omen, of ...” illustrating the inseparability of the material properties of the liver and its foreboding, refer to royal names, sometimes giving as little additional information as a simple geographical name. The models Rutten 1938, n°s. 1, 2 and 3 refer to the Akkadian kings Sargon, Rīmuš and his brother Maništušu, and Narām-Sīn respectively, while n°s. 5 and 6–8 name the Ur-III (2111–2003 BC) kings Šulgi and Ibī-Suen and n°s. 9–10 and 11 connect the portrayed findings with the early Old Babylonian kings Išbi-Erra and Išme-Dagan of Isin. As stated by Pettinato, the liver models “sind der Sprache nach noch altakkadisch” (Pettinato 1966, 17) and, if not primary sources from the Akkadian period, can be understood as carrying on earlier traditions (cf. also Goetze 1947, 264f.).

8 Cf. for example the boastful account by Šulgi of Ur, who claims that he was versed in both lecanomancy and libanomancy (Volk 1996, 210 n. 187).

9 Note also the presence of historical apodoses in the series *šumma izbu* and *enūma Anu Enlil* (note 5).

10 While a number of methods for *omina impetrativa*, such as divination by means of pouring oil on water, scattering flour, burning incense and similar, are amongst the early omen compendia, extispicy is the sole practice of provoked omens to become part of the written ‘stream of tradition’, as reflected in the sources from the first millennium. However, their absence from the written record does not seem to reflect the reality of their use, as references in later texts illustrate (cf. for example Nougayrol 1963, 381 for aleuromancy). Rather, it has to be assumed that these cheaper methods for the investigation of the divine will were commonplace among the general population, who did not have access to sacrificial sheep, and that their absence from the written record reflects the fact that writing was intrinsically connected to the administrative body of the state and the wealthy upper classes. In addition, it is conspicuous that the two Old Babylonian lecanomancy texts, which preserve the majority of the entries including apodoses, contain a limited number of predictions regarding the fate of the army and are mainly concerned with the destiny of ordinary people. The 72 entries of the text published by Giovanni Pettinato as “Text I” (Pettinato 1966, 12ff.) contain 16 references to campaigns, only one of which is the sole prediction of the apodosis, while all others are part of two-part apodoses, with alternative interpretations for campaign and sick patient. “Text 2” (Pettinato 1966, 57ff.) has a slightly larger ratio, with 17 apodoses referring to military campaigns in 67 entries in total, three of which are single-part apodoses.

pendia goes hand in hand with their inflation to compilations containing as many as 10000 omens, spanning more than one hundred tablets.¹¹ This is driven by two main factors. On the one hand, the aspiration to create comprehensive works, neglecting no possible observation, leads to the creation of purely theoretical entries that follow the combinational patterns of the series in question, despite not reflecting observable realities;¹² on the other hand, the apparently secondary arrangement in series with a particular focus means that single omens and even whole complexes of observations find their way into more than one series.¹³

3 The Neo-Assyrian Network of Scholars in Royal Employ

Just like their forebears, the Neo-Assyrian kings considered themselves rulers by divine favour and representatives of the Sun God on earth, installed to execute the will of the gods. In order to live and rule in accordance with this, the palace employed a large staff of scholars from five main disciplines that could be traced back to the antediluvian sages:¹⁴ Personnel educated in the fields of *tupšarûtu* (“astrology”), *bārûtu* (“extispicy”), *āšipûtu* (“incantation”), *asûtu* (“medicine”), and *kalûtu* (“lamentation”)¹⁵ were at the king’s service for advice and support and to carry out all necessary actions.¹⁶ While there does not seem to have been a clear division between experts of

¹¹ The most extensive series is the collection of terrestrial omens, known after its incipit as *šumma ālu ina melê šakin* “if a city is set on a height”, which must have spanned at least 107 tablets containing around 10000 entries (Freedman 1998, 6).

¹² Rochberg-Halton 1990, 27.

¹³ While each series has a particular focus and collects observations in accordance with its main theme, the exhaustion of all possible phenomena necessarily leads to overlapping topic areas. Thus entries included in the teratomanancy series, *šumma izbu*, also have a certain relevance in sections of the terrestrial series *šumma ālu* concerned with animals (Moren 1980, 53f.).

¹⁴ According to legend, a total of seven fish-men emerged from the *apsû*, the sweet water horizon situated below the earth and residence of the god of wisdom, Enki/Ea, on his orders to deliver knowledge of the sciences and crafts and other aspects of civilisation to humankind (Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 296). The story is still reflected in Berossos’ *Babyloniaca* (Burstein 1978, 13f.).

¹⁵ Verderame 2008, 52.

¹⁶ The plans of the gods were not inevitable, and rather than having to surrender to evil portended by the observation of an unfavourable unprovoked omen, becoming aware of it in advance provided the opportunity for counteraction by means of performing the relevant ritual, as is reflected in the nonchalant attitude of the Assyrian scholar Balasī (SAA VIII 82, 10: *mī-i-nu ḫi-iṭ-ṭu* NAM.BÜR.BI-ŠÚ *lu e-pi-iš* “What is the harm? Let its *namburbi* ritual be performed.” For the nature and role of *namburbi* rituals see Maul 1994). Particularly serious cases threatening the life of the king necessitated the performance of the complex substitute king ritual, during which a commoner was installed on the throne for a prescribed period of 100 days while the king himself was to be addressed as “the farmer” (cf.

the single disciplines, and scholars were versed in the knowledge of assorted texts of a variety of genres,¹⁷ individuals were employed for specific tasks. The *tupšarrū* were primarily responsible for the observation and interpretation of celestial phenomena set out in the series *enūma Anu Enlil*, but were expected to stay alert to signs from other series of unprovoked omens of possible significance for the fate of the king or the country. As an expert in extispicy, the *bārū* was commissioned to obtain essential information indicating whether a planned undertaking was seen as favourable or unfavourable in the eyes of the gods. Although the extispicy series was composed according to the same principles as other omen series, listing entries of the nature “if ..., then ...”, its application was quite different. Apodoses were essentially reduced to their nature as positive or negative and the answer to any individual omen query was obtained through the addition of all positive and negative signs observed on the sacrificial animal’s liver.¹⁸

The experts, referred to as *ummânū* in Akkadian, were divided into an inner circle of royal advisers, and an outer circle consisting of the more remote scholars. Members of the inner circle, who seem to have been recruited largely from a limited number of influential and established Assyrian scholarly families, were situated at court¹⁹ or in the capital city and held considerable power.²⁰ Extraneous advisers who were not resident at or near the palace were part of a complex network, monitoring ominous events outside of the capital and spanning the entire territory of the Neo-Assyrian empire.²¹ While the performance of extispicy was the main focus of the diviners in

for example SAA X 26, sent during this period: *a-na LÚ.ENGAR EN-ia* “To the farmer, my lord” (l. 1)). In order for the ritual to be effective and spare the king’s life, the substituted subject had to either die or be killed at the end of the period in question to satisfy the divine plan. For a description of the complex of rituals and activities, see Verderame 2013, 317ff.

17 A letter from the Babylonian scholar Marduk-šapik-zēri details his accomplishments not only in his father’s profession, the discipline of lamentation (*kalûtu*), but in the study of a variety of omen series (SAA X 160, 36–46).

18 See, for example, the extispicy report SAA IV 280, which, following a detailed report of the observations during the examination (ll. 1–13), repeats the indicators with negative implications (ll. 14–17) and sums up 5 TAG.MEŠ *ina ŠĀ-bi* / SIG₅.MEŠ *ia-a-nu* / TAG-at “(There are) five ‘afflictions’ in it, there are no positives—unfavourable.” (ll. 18–20). While the simple addition of positive and negative apodoses formed the basis for the interpretation of an extispicy, it was complicated by the fact that certain “joker” signs had specific implications and could reverse the result or render a query void (Koch-Westenholz 2000, 57f sub *nip̄hu* and 61 sub *pitruštu*).

19 SAA X 182, a plea from a slighted extispicer appealing to the crown prince, shows that a place within the inner circle of scholars was lucrative and had many benefits attached, but that the position was never secure and individuals were dependent on the mercy of the royal family.

20 Thus displays of rivalry and jealousy, as in SAA X 226, 30–49, are not surprising and were probably part of everyday life at the Neo-Assyrian court.

21 SAA VIII 499 refers to a meeting between the sender and the king in the Southern Babylonian city Ur (ll. 10f.) and indicates that remotely stationed scholars did not communicate with the king solely in writing, but could have personal audiences.

the king's vicinity, this type of *omina impetrativa* did not enjoy the same significance in the remainder of the empire,²² and observations of phenomena that might foreshadow significant future events were of greater importance. It was particularly crucial for the king to have *tupšarrū* stationed throughout Assyrian and Babylonian territory to “keep the king's watch”²³ and submit regular reports,²⁴ as the possibility for the observation of celestial phenomena could vary geographically and any singular event connected to animal or human behaviour could be of significance.

All scholarly experts were bound to the king by oath,²⁵ although appointment to the king's service was by no means for life and individuals depended on his good will as they could be demoted at any point.²⁶ In addition to the oath, the loyalty of distant scholars who could not be under the direct control and supervision of the king and his most trusted advisers, often seems to have been secured through the residence of the scholars' sons at the royal court, ultimately as hostages.²⁷

4 Materiality of the Divine Message

Although part of the same idea, namely the interaction and communication with the gods to determine divine plans for the future of humankind, *omina oblativa* and *omina impetrativa* differed considerably in their conception and use.

Omina oblativa were dependent on the gods providing information and could only foreshadow significant events in accordance with the established framework of entries within the omen series. Thus the nature and shape of the gods' communications were predetermined by the inclusion of any given event in the omen series, as only

²² This does not take into account military campaigns, during which inquiries into the divine will were indispensable. It is likely that under those circumstances, other types of *omina impetrativa* that required fewer resources than extispicy could also be employed.

²³ Cf. a letter from the Babylonian astrologer Munnabitū, who states LUGAL *tè-e-mu il-tak-na-an-ni um-ma* EN.NUN-*a úšur* “The king has given me instructions. Thus he: “Keep my watch!”” (SAA VIII 316, 30) and notes elsewhere that, now that he has submitted his report, the chief exorcist should carry out all necessary measures (l. 18).

²⁴ SAA VIII 338 indicates that an astrological report was due to be issued at the end of the month and that early reports could be understood as premature (ll. 4–8).

²⁵ SAA X 7, 6–14: [16]A.BA.MEŠ [16]HAL.MEŠ / [16]MAŠ.MAŠ.MEŠ / [16]A.ZU.MEŠ / [16]*da-gīl* MUŠEN.MEŠ / [ma] *n-za-az* Ê.GAL / [a]-šī-ib URU / [16]BARAG UD.16.KÂM / *ina ŠĀ a-de-e / er-ru-bu* “The astrologers, the extispicers, the exorcists, the physicians and the augurs, who are courtiers of the palace and residents of the city, will enter into the oath on the sixteenth day of Nisannu”.

²⁶ SAA X 294 presents a long and detailed account of the fate of Urad-Gula, who, (at least in his own opinion) through no fault of his own fell from royal grace, and SAA VIII 442 shows the plight of a scholar who has been assigned to making bricks instead of following his profession.

²⁷ Cf. SAA VIII 517, which ends with the plea to return the scholar's son to his supervision so that both may carry out their services to the king together (ll. 20–23).

events listed as ominous could be interpreted and understood, and the meaning of any given event was prescribed *verbatim* in the paired prediction. As stated above, the main purpose of the observations was the identification and subsequent prevention of impending evil. However, despite all predictions concerning the fate of the country or the king having to be reported to the palace by royal decree,²⁸ this was directly dependent on the presence or absence of an observer and his or her knowledge of its pertinent meaning, as the majority of ominous events were singular and selective.

Omina impetrativa, on the other hand, offered a means for the human partner of the conversation to start the dialogue and could be performed as required, putting divine information at the disposal of the king. The significance of this was particularly enhanced by the application of Neo-Assyrian extispicy, employed to gain clear approval or dismissal of royal plans rather than providing disjointed pieces of information on possibly irrelevant or disconnected topics. With expense as the only limiting factor to the frequency of addressing the gods and the performance of the enquiry by trained extispicers, the risk of missing any important communication was as good as eliminated. In addition, precautions were put in place to ensure that no unknown factors, such as unconscious improper conduct by anyone involved in the performance, would alter the disposition of the gods and influence the outcome of the query.²⁹

5 “In the eye of the Beholder”: The Impact of the Scholar as Recipient of the Divine Message

Theoretically, the interpretation of signs on the basis of the existing omen collections was predetermined and *ad hoc* interpretations were not intended. However, the process of interpretation as reflected in the omen reports is more fluid, as both astrologers and diviners could only ever provide a subjective interpretation.

The starting point of any reading of the divine signs was formed by the selection of phenomena or characteristics observed, which was certainly determined by the

²⁸ Since diviners in the service of the king were a priori employed to submit all observations to the palace and were bound by oath to this effect, the decree seems to have been a general address to the country. Although omens were no doubt part of everyday life, it is questionable to what extent the general population, and especially the illiterate parts of society, would have been aware of the specific wording of any of the extensive omen collections or in a position to transmit any observation to the king.

²⁹ The so-called *ēzib* (“leave aside, disregard”) formulae introduce possible scenarios that might have an impact on the outcome of the extispicy, such as the contact of the sacrificial animal with an impure person or the unwilling contamination of the extispicer, and instruct the gods not to take those into account when providing their answer to the oracle query (Starr 1990, xxii–xxvii).

knowledge and experience of the individual. Another factor was their familiarity with the required section of one of the lengthy compendia, as the presence of all tablets of an omen collection at any observation “in the field” was unrealistic in light of the sheer volume of text. The fact that it was not possible for scholars to memorise the entire work by heart is highlighted by assurances in the correspondence that observations would be checked against the written tradition.³⁰ However, the memory of the exact details of an observed sign could fade in the time elapsed between observation and reference check, and features could be overlooked during the initial observation due to the scholar’s ignorance as to their significance.

The situation was further complicated because the exact meaning of any given sign was often ambiguous, difficult to understand or in need of further explanations³¹ and could thus lead to differing interpretations.³² Frequently, extraneous material or oral traditions could be drawn upon that were not part of the canonical series,³³ which in turn could be modified from time to time,³⁴ no doubt resulting in deviating versions.

6 Realities of Life and Their Impact on the Transmission of Divine Communication to the King

In light of the subjective nature of the interpretations, it is not surprising that the confidence enjoyed by scholars was limited to the extent that more than one individual was entrusted with the same task, and there are frequent attestations of disagreements about observations³⁵ and of warnings to the king not to accept a differing interpretation of a particular phenomenon.³⁶ Despite the disagreements and compe-

30 In SAA X 71 the astrologer Nabû-aḥḫe-eriba informs the king that the observation will be checked and the relevant tablet sent to the king for reference (ll. 1’–5’).

31 As pointed out by Balasî in a letter to the king with regard to the terrestrial omen series (SAA X 60). The same scholar sends instructions for the exact details to be laid out to the king by one of his advisers on receipt of the news of a lunar eclipse (SAA X 57 rev. 3’–7’). The intricate nature of the texts, which rarely used phonetic writing, preferring obscure logographic spellings known only to the initiated, led to the creation of a whole subgenre of commentary texts during the first millennium.

32 In the report SAA VIII 7, 10–12, the astrologer Issar-šumu-ereš points out to the king: “Is there any sign that is set? There is not! (GIŠKIM-šu-ú *me-me-ni i-ba-ši / ša ir-bu-u-ni / la-âš-šu*).

33 SAA X 8 quotes omens that are “not from the Series” (*la-a ša ÊŠ.QAR-ma* [l. 28]), but “from the oral (tradition) of the scholars” (*ša pi-i um-ma-ni* [l.29]), or “extraneous” (*a-ḫi-u* [l. 35]).

34 Unfortunately it is not clear which series the modification suggested in SAA X 177, 15–22 refers to.

35 E.g. SAA VIII 83, 6–8: *it-ti-ma-li* ^{ld}15-MU-APIN-*eš* / *ina ŠA Ê.GAL ša-a-su / a-na* ^{ld}PA-PAB.MEŠ-SU *ig-di-ri* “Yesterday, Issar-šumu-ereš had a quarrel with Nabû-aḥḫe-eriba in the palace.” Both individuals are scholars known from the correspondence as reporting to the king regularly.

36 Balasî pleads with the king not to listen to a particular interpretation with the words “This omen

tion, however, there was a sense of community and brotherhood within the scholarly profession,³⁷ certainly also inspired by a common interest to ensure the king's dependence on the specialists.³⁸ Thus, it is not unthinkable that scholars in the same area would compare reports before sending them off, in order to avoid scandal or reprimand, meaning that feelings of mutual loyalty amongst individual scholars could influence the final message delivered to the king. For the most part, however, messages appended to the reports show that the senders acted in their own self-interest. The notes give insight into the plights of daily life and range from personal requests for the provision of sustenance³⁹ and complaints about duties of corvée work⁴⁰ to the jealous denunciation of colleagues.⁴¹

The inclusion of personal messages following the omen reports shows that the scholars believed that their submissions were either read by the king himself or transmitted to him verbatim, and that through this medium they could make their voices heard. Carried to extremes, this could lead to very short, generic reports of two lines followed by lengthy and detailed descriptions of personal problems,⁴² giving the impression that in the documents in question the reports may have been used as an excuse for approaching the king. The quantity and length of the submitted reports from all scholars, however, makes it highly likely that the material was not delivered to the king directly, but to the chief *tupšarru*, who was part of the inner circle of advisers to the king and who would evaluate and consolidate the relevant information in order to make it more manageable.⁴³ Thus the pleas for help and the myriad

is a lie — let the king not take it to heart.” (*šū-mu an-ni-u si-li-a-te šū-u-[tú]* / LUGAL *be-lí ina* UGU ŠĀ-ŠÚ *la i-šak-[kán-šú]* [SAA VIII 101, 13–14]).

37 This is evident in the request to send a physician for a fellow diviner who has fallen ill, attached to the report SAA VIII 463, and the apparent advice concerning the interpretation of a particular sign offered in SAA X 384.

38 This is no doubt also the reason behind the statement that no uninitiated person could possibly understand the full extent of an omen series in the previously cited SAA X 60.

39 SAA VIII 474, 10–21.

40 SAA VIII 296, 4–20.

41 SAA X 289, 72.

42 See, for example, SAA VIII 309.

43 At least some of the scholars who submitted written reports to the palace also seem to have enjoyed occasional personal audiences, as in the case of the extispicer Kudurru, who writes: *ul-lu* LUGAL *be-lí / ṭe-e-mu / iš-kun-an-ni / am-ma ina* MU.AN.NA / 2-šú *a-na pa-ni-ia / al-ka* “Did the king, my lord, not order me: ‘Come before me twice a year!’” (SAA X 371, 32–37).

well-wishes expressed by the scholars,⁴⁴ which were probably intended to secure the king's favour, may never have reached their intended audience.⁴⁵

7 Materiality of the Material of the Communications: A Note on the Chance of Preservation

When evaluating the materiality and nature of the communication of divine will to the king in the Neo-Assyrian period, it has to be borne in mind that the information available is incomplete due to the chance of preservation and discovery. The excavation of large numbers of tablets in the archives of the Neo-Assyrian palace in Nineveh⁴⁶ means that the spotlight on the correspondence between the king and his scholars is restricted to reports and letters sent to the palace. While formulations such as “regarding what the king wrote to me”⁴⁷ document bilateral communication, the exact nature of these communications remains obscure in the absence of the discovery of larger private archives of the scholars. In addition, references in a number of reports point to the use of wooden writing boards,⁴⁸ none of which have survived through the ages, and there is the element of oral communication, which certainly took place, at least at court, but the extent of which is impossible to grasp.

⁴⁴ For a particularly emphatic wish of good luck cf. *SAA VIII* 421, 8–15: ^d*aš-šur* ^dUTU ^dAG ^du ^dAMAR.UTU / UD-mu *a-na* UD-mu ITI *a-na* ITI / MU.AN.NA *a-na* MU.AN.NA *tu-ub* ŠĀ-bi / *tu-ub* UZU *hi-du-ti* u *ri-šá-a-ti* / ^g*GU.ZA* *šá ki-na-a-ti* / *a-na da-riš a-na* UD.MEŠ GÍD.DA.MEŠ / *ù* MU.AN.NA.MEŠ *ma-a'-da-a-ti* / *a-na* LUGAL *be-lí-ia lid-di-nu* “Let Aššur, Šamaš, Nabû and Marduk day after day, month after month, year after year, give to the king, my lord, happiness, health, joy and exultation, and a firm throne forever, for long days and for many years.”

⁴⁵ *SAA X* 328 bears witness that letters sent to the king could remain unanswered, as an exasperated enquiry after the king's health following the repeated dispatch of medication shows: *šum-ma ú-š[e]-ri¹-bu ina pa-an* [LUGAL EN]-*ia* / *šum-ma la ú-še-rib-bu la ú-da* / *la gab-ri e-gír-ti a-mar* / *la DI-mu šá* LUGAL *be-lí-ia áš-šam-me* “I do not know whether they were brought before the king or whether they were not brought; I do not see an answer to my letter; I do not hear (about) the health of the king, my lord” (ll. 11–14).

⁴⁶ The tablets were excavated at Kouyunjik, one of the ruin mounds of the ancient capital, located on the left bank of the Tigris opposite the modern city of Mosul, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

⁴⁷ E.g. *SAA X* 68, 7–8: *ša* LUGAL *be-lí* / *iš-pur-an-ni*.

⁴⁸ For attestations see Hunger 1992, 325 and Parpola 1993, 343 respectively, sub *lē'u* “writing-board”.

8 Concluding Remarks

A demonstrated active personal interest in the study of omen literature and a certain readiness to dismiss or reprimand scholars deemed unfit for royal service show that the Neo-Assyrian kings were not blindly reliant on their scholars' reports and advice. Aware of the possibility of errors of judgement, as well as outright manipulation,⁴⁹ the assignment of more than one individual to any one task was used as a mechanism of verification, although it is likely that irregularities could still go unnoticed.

While the extent of manipulations and their motivations—for personal gain, out of fear or due to familial, regional or even national allegiance—cannot be reconstructed, the understanding of the Neo-Assyrian omen scholar as “an automaton or a robot”,⁵⁰ only serving to supply the king with information, must be rejected. Rather, the letters and reports reveal the reality of their human nature and the fact that their judgement, although based on a deep-rooted belief in the omnipresence of the divine, could be influenced by a myriad of other, more worldly, factors.

It emerges from the available evidence that the relationship between the Neo-Assyrian kings and their scholars was one of mutual dependence. On the one hand, the king was in no position to navigate all relevant knowledge, observations, their interpretation and possible remedial ritual actions, so he had no choice but to rely on and trust in the abilities of his staff to provide him with the information necessary to shape imperial policy. On the other hand, the scholars were dependent on the king as their employer and benefactor, and had to tread the fine line between making the information supplied to the king as pleasing as possible while trying to secure their survival both professionally and literally, and retaining their professional integrity, particularly in the face of a comparison with competing experts.

Abbreviations

AbS-T	Signature for tablets from Abu Šalābīḥ
RIME	<i>Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Early Periods</i> (Toronto)
SAA	<i>State Archives of Assyria</i> (Helsinki)
TCL	<i>Textes Cuneiformes</i>
YOS	<i>Yale Oriental Series</i> (New Haven/London)
WVDOG	<i>Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft</i> (Wiesbaden)

⁴⁹ In SAA X 179 a scholar freely admits to falsifying an extispicy result under duress.

⁵⁰ Parpola 1983, xviii.

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Douglas Fear

utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha—Written on Clay and Parchment: Old Persian Writing and Allography in Iranian

History is often defined as starting when written records become available. While this is clearly not the whole story, it is certainly a valid definition in cases where every oral tradition has ceased to exist, either because the language or languages involved are no longer spoken, and may even have been entirely replaced by others (for example Gaulish), or simply because too much time has passed (for example Ancient Egyptian, with its four thousand years of written history, but with no real trace of any oral tradition that may have existed in the fourth millennium BC, for instance, being found in the late Coptic tradition).

The beginning of Iranian history in the sense of being written by (or for) Iranian speakers is fairly precisely datable only in the case of Old Persian. The other Old Iranian language known to us, Avestan, is transmitted in parts in a form which is clearly much older, probably concurrent with Vedic, but of course this does not permit precise dating. Apart from this, the texts are not what we would call *historical*, unless we allow considerable latitude in defining the term historical. In this contribution, religious texts—which is what the Avestan *Gāthās* are—will not be regarded as historical in the narrower sense, i.e. dealing with political events and occurrences. (There is a difference between texts that are historical and texts that are embedded in a historical context.) Naturally, there is always a difficulty in dealing with ancient cultures and their remains, including texts, that consists in our being necessarily somewhat biased by the intervening time and the (cultural and other) changes that this entails. All ancient cultures must be alien to us. ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’¹ ‘Time, like water, refracts the image.’²

Taking, then, the first application of a writing system to reproduce in some way something that has been expressed in a spoken language as the starting point,³ the next question to be asked is what effect, if any, this writing system may have had subsequently. The answer will depend on a number of factors. Does the language involved have a function beyond its normal community? Is its writing system then adapted to other languages? A positive answer to the first question would seem to be the prerequisite for a positive answer to the second. If the language has a func-

1 Hartley 1953.

2 Chesney 1970, 2.

3 Note that there may be other reasons to start writing, and that writing is not a one-to-one reproduction of speech in any case. Cf. Olson 1998, 89, 182, and generally; cf. also Grésillon 1995.

tion beyond the range of its normal community, then there is a certain probability that speakers of other languages who are influenced by the first-named community will also take over the writing system employed by the latter—unless, of course, they already have a writing system.

Examples are not hard to find. The Latin alphabet (which has its own prior history) spread in the course of the expansion of the Roman Empire, and was employed wherever Latin was spoken, whether as a first or an acquired language. Some tribes among the Celtic peoples of Central Europe adopted this alphabet to write their language, in particular some of the Gauls. Similarly, the Greek alphabet (or rather one of its variants) spread with Alexander's conquests to parts of the Middle East, notably Bactria, where the indigenous Iranian language of the post-Alexandrian rulers was written with Greek letters. Indeed, a similar situation obtained much earlier in parts of Asia Minor, where the Lydians, Carians, Phrygians, and Lycians (and doubtless others) used Greek letters or at least the template of the Greek alphabet. The Indian Brāhmī script was also exported to other lands and other peoples; the Iranian language Khotanese and the Tocharian languages were written with forms of it. This example shows, too, that political and military conquest need not always be involved in the process. Religion or other cultural phenomena may be at work.

The process of adoption and adaptation—and both are always present as facets of the process of taking over a writing system—is a highly complex one, which must be seen against the background of many other processes taking place at the same time. Some of these have been mentioned *en passant* above: political-military expansion, religious proselytisation, contact in the economic sphere. But one must distinguish, too, among a number of possible scenarios concerning writing itself. Alloglottography is by no means unknown, perhaps the best-known example being Japanese.⁴ Indeed, the Old Persian writing system was likely created using the inspiration of the Elamite and Babylonian cuneiform systems. Anyone who has studied the Middle Iranian languages to any extent will be well aware of the so-called ideogrammes (actually Aramaic words or abbreviations) scattered generously throughout Parthian, Middle Persian, or Sogdian texts. We ourselves use Arabic⁵ numeral signs in everyday texts. These examples, furthermore, illustrate that alloglottography does not necessarily imply alloglottophasia (that is, writing foreign linguistic elements need not entail the actual spoken use of such elements), although the one does not exclude the other.

Contact between cultures is necessary, in whatever form, for a writing system to be transmitted from one to the other. But those adopting the script must feel some need for writing, too. The two most frequent triggers are economic and religious. These involve questions of prestige, or social standing, both with a view to the internal and to the external. The Celtic prince who could display Etruscan wine vessels

⁴ See Coulmas 1981, 57 ff.

⁵ A historically conditioned misnomer, of course.

was displaying his wealth as a symbol of power internally, to be sure, but at the same time he may well have been showing that he was not inferior to those who had made and brought said vessel.⁶ Writing in one's own language was most certainly also an attempt to make a statement about the position of that language and its speakers. In Republican Rome, it was common for noble sons to learn Etruscan, as a prestige language of what we would call science and religion (though the separation of these concepts would have been quite alien to the Romans); but very early on it was felt necessary to adopt the Etruscan system of writing in order to express Latin, albeit with various modifications made over time.⁷ Ironically, Latin itself was to suffer something of the same fate.

If the adoption and adaptation of a writing system is a complex affair in social terms, so, too, is the technical end of things. Writing materials⁸ have had an influence on how things are written. For example, in North India the *χάλαμος* was used, whereas in South India the stylus was the more common choice; this led to differing styles of writing.⁹ The Germanic runes would appear to have been designed specifically for inscribing on materials such as wood or bone.¹⁰ Chinese script, famously, has been strongly influenced by the brush (although the oldest examples are clearly scratched, or rather carved, into bones, turtle shells, and the like). Cuneiform scripts are the result of impressing marks upon wet clay. The Roman practice of using wax tablets is well known, as is that of using strips of wood¹¹ (the latter being very widespread and certainly not limited to the Romans, as Tocharian and Sogdian examples show).

Yet some doubt is allowed here. There is no absolute predictability as to the form that a script may take, based solely on the writing materials originally used for it. The Latin alphabet (or the Greek, for that matter) was not originally intended for stone inscriptions, or at least not solely, but was later widely used for precisely that.

⁶ See, for example, the comment by J. Biel in Biel/Frankensteen 1998⁴, 166: “Letztlich dürfte auch das Entstehen dieser Fürstenschicht mit ihren Prunkgräbern eine Reflexion auf den Süden sein, die auch in anderen Kontaktzonen dieser Art zu beobachten ist...”.

⁷ For example, the lack of voiced stop phonemes in Etruscan, reflected in the writing, made things difficult in Latin, where such voiced stops had phonemic status. The abbreviations C. and Cn. for Gaius and Gnaeus, respectively, are a case in point, as well as illustrating the conservatism inherent in writing.

⁸ Cf. Clarysse/Vandorpe 2008, 719–721 on writing materials in Classical Antiquity.

⁹ Cf. Bechert/Simson 1993, 45.

¹⁰ Cf. Krause 1970, 46, where Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers in the 6th century, is quoted: *barbara fraxineis pingatur runa tabellis: quodque papyrus agit, virgula plana valet*. Cf. also Düwel 2001³, 203, where the source for this quote is given more exactly: *Carmina* VII, 18, 19f., in *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, auctores antiquissimi IV.1, 173. See further Derolez 1990, 429–430.

¹¹ The Vindolanda tablets are the best-known examples of Roman writing on wood. Very recently, similar such wooden writing tablets have been found at the remarkable archaeological site in Queen Victoria Street, London, cf. Kennedy 2013.

Cuneiform, i.e. a script consisting of wedge-shaped markings, is not the only possible outcome of making marks on wet clay, as Linear B clearly shows. Germanic runes are equally well written on signboards and paper, when it comes to that.¹²

Yet one cannot escape the feeling that the medium, in a way, does constitute a message, although not quite in the way that Marshall McLuhan meant.¹³ A case in point is the Old Persian writing system, generally called cuneiform because of its physical similarity to the Mesopotamian cuneiform scripts, although the Old Persian script functions in a very different way. This script appears to have been invented specifically for the purpose of writing in Old Persian, and not, for instance, in the closely related Median, nor any other language, related or not.¹⁴ What was written is known to an extent, although to what extent remains unknown. As a result, perceptions of Old Persian writing have been of a script used for purely monumental purposes—for show, not to put too fine a point on it. The Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions known to us are royal inscriptions, found on rock faces and stone buildings (the mountain at Bīsītūn, the royal tomb of Dareios I at Naqš-e-Rustam, various examples at Persepolis, and so on) or on various objects (the gold and silver tablets DHa⁶ and DHa⁵ from Hamadan, the remains of the stele inscription DZa from Suez, and so on).¹⁵ In other words, this script appears to have been used almost exclusively for the purpose of royal display, whether in the form of a monumental inscription or on objects as an indicator of royal power and presence. This use is almost exclusive, but not entirely. A tantalising discovery made in 2006 means that we can no longer exclude the possibility that the Old Persian script was also used for non-royal purposes.¹⁶

Among the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, one has been found with Old Persian writing on it. If Fort. 1208–101 (the official designation of the tablet in question) is a unique example of the non-royal use of Old Persian writing, then there is the problem of explaining why on earth someone felt it necessary to create this tablet. Its content

¹² To dispel possible doubt: I refer here not to any supposed use of ancient Germanic runes in modern times, but to the modern usage of one rune, albeit completely misunderstood, in Modern English—signs, for example, of the type *Ye Olde Village Shoppe* and the like, where what is now interpreted as <Y> is no other than the Old English rune *þ* (*Thorn*), presumably revived or taken over from old manuscripts by the early printers. It was written in a simplified form strongly resembling a cursive Latin *y*, a tendency apparently strengthened by the earliest type, which was imported and thus did not contain any such letter. Cf. Bischoff 1979, 119, on the continued use of this rune (and some others) as late as the 15th century.

¹³ I refer here to McLuhan's famous statement in McLuhan 1964.

¹⁴ The existence of a sign for the sibilant which, in Old Persian and nowhere else, had developed out of the consonant combination */θr/ (Proto-Iranian), is a powerful indication that the script was developed purely for this language and no other. Furthermore, this particular Old Persian symbol is among the morphologically simplest, which could be taken as an indication that it was among the earliest signs in the canon to be developed. Cf. Schmitt 2004, 722.

¹⁵ For a complete list of inscriptions and objects, see Schmitt 2009.

¹⁶ Cf. Stolper/Tavernier 2007.

is similar to the content of a myriad other tablets in the archive, purely a record of economic matters. The remarkable thing, as Stolper¹⁷ points out, is not that this is a clay tablet with an Old Persian inscription in Old Persian writing, but that it is a ‘practical text’¹⁸ forming part of ‘an administrative record’.¹⁹ Parts of DSe and DSf are known from clay tablets; Dareios I himself says (DB IV 70) that ‘*utā pavastāyā utā carmā grftam āha*’ (‘it [the inscription] was written on clay and parchment [too]’),²⁰ but until now no non-royal texts have been found save this one. The sentence just quoted can be interpreted in different ways, of course. It may be that Dareios is, in fact, referring to Old Persian written with Aramaic script on parchment, rather than Old Persian cuneiform.²¹ There is allegedly at least one inscription that uses Aramaic writing, but is apparently Old Persian in language. This is an inscription to the right of the entrance to the tomb of Dareios I at Naqš-e-Rustam.²² But if Richard Frye is right in dating this to the late Achaimenid period,²³ then it does not necessarily follow that Aramaic was already used in the early Achaimenid period to write Old Persian, apart from the doubts surrounding the Old Persian nature of what is written in this particular inscription.

In view of the fact that most Middle Iranian languages are indeed written with some form of Aramaic script (the two major exceptions being Bactrian and Khotanese, see above), it would seem not improbable that Old Persian might have been written this way too. Yet that tablet written in Old Persian cuneiform will not go away. If, as it suggests, Old Persian was written for everyday purposes in Old Persian cuneiform, why did this system of writing not prevail? After all, from what we can tell, the script would appear to have been developed especially for the Old Persian language; it was, if not better suited for this purpose, quite certainly no worse than the Aramaic script. Indeed, at least in the very first inscription, that of Dareios at Bisitūn, the Old Persian script uses special marks to divide what is written into discrete units. To a modern reader, it actually resembles a present-day text divided into what are termed (with considerable lack of clarity) ‘words’.²⁴ The various texts in Aramaic script or its derivatives in Middle Iranian languages are also divided into discrete units, but

¹⁷ Cf. note 14.

¹⁸ Stolper/Tavernier 2007, (cf. note 14).

¹⁹ Stolper/Tavernier 2007, (cf. note 14).

²⁰ Cited after Schmitt 2009.

²¹ This is the view taken by Bae 2008, 138–139.

²² This and the following are based on Frye 1982. The inscription appears to be the one mentioned in Kent 1953, 109, with reference there to Herzfeld 1924, 244 and to Cameron 1948, 29. See also Skjærvø 1996, 517.

²³ Frye 1982, 90.

²⁴ The vexed problem of the ‘word’ cannot be discussed here, but I would like to direct the reader’s attention to Miller 1994, 85ff., where the confusion is demonstrated (although Miller himself believes that the term can be used), and most especially to Heger 1976, chapter 3, particularly §3.3.1.

these are units of a different nature. No modern reader confronted with one of these texts, for instance, the Manichaean Sogdian text of the Pearl Borer,²⁵ would recognise any great resemblance to the ‘words’ of a modern text. This is not to say that there is any reason to assume that the division into discrete units, however carried out, necessarily made reading easier (there is good reason to think that it does not). It simply illustrates that Old Persian writing was not in any way inferior to other scripts in use at the time. Nor should one assume that the Semitic scripts were all of a muchness. There is the highly interesting case of Ugaritic, which used a Northern Linear (Canaanite) script adapted for argillographic use under the influence of Mesopotamian cuneiform;²⁶ in effect, what we have in Ugaritic is a Semitic script (related to Aramaic script) refashioned as a kind of cuneiform. The opposite could have been done for Old Persian writing, i.e. it could have been transmuted into a form perfectly usable on, say, parchment, although admittedly there has been no indication of this. There is, in any case, no basis for arguing that the one or the other script was more suited in any way for either purpose, daily record-keeping or monumental display, epistolary (as it were) or inscriptional.

We see that the question goes both ways: theoretically, Aramaic could equally well have been written with Old Persian writing, or Old Persian with Aramaic writing. Aramaic writing could also be used to create monumental or quasi-monumental inscriptions; Old Persian writing could have been used to create texts other than monumental inscriptions. The form of the Old Persian script would not, then, have been in any way a hindrance. It must be pointed out, of course, that the Old Persian writing system was not entirely suited to Aramaic, but this would not have been a stumbling block either, at least from the purely technical standpoint of adaptation. After all, neither the Sogdians nor the Greeks, nor quite a number of other peoples, seem to have been unduly worried by any unsuitability in the Semitic writing systems they adopted. They simply modified the scripts to more or less suit their needs. Technically, then, there seems to be no good reason why Old Persian cuneiform should not have continued in use after the Achaemenid period, and for languages other than Persian itself. It would exceed the bounds of this essay to undertake a closer examination of the Old Persian cuneiform writing system, but some remarks may nevertheless be made here.

The writing conventions used in Old Persian, by now well known, can be compared to those in similar systems; this could reveal something of the rationale behind these conventions. The following orthographical conventions are known to exist in Old Persian:²⁷

²⁵ See Henning 1945, 465–469.

²⁶ Cf. Bright/Daniels 1996, 88–92.

²⁷ After Schmitt 2004. The symbols generally used in scientific investigations of writing apply: [...] = phonetic representation, /.../ = phonemic representation; <...> = graphemic representation; C = any

1. Phonologically long and short vowels are not distinguished, with the single exception of /ā/ in word-initial position.
2. Proto-Iranian */a/ in word-final position is written with an additional <a>, i.e. as <Ca-a>. This may, in fact, represent an actually extant long vowel phoneme.
3. The vowel phonemes /i/, /ī/, /u/, /ū/ are written with the (purely) vowel signs <i> and <u>; in word-internal position, they are additionally indicated with <Cⁱ> or <C^u>, respectively. If no such sign is present, then <C^a-i> or <C^a-u>, respectively, must be read in this position.
4. The vowel phonemes /i/, /ī/, /u/, /ū/ in word-final position are written with an additional semi-vowel <y^a> or <v^a> (the former for the i-phonemes, the latter for the u-phonemes): <-i-y^a>, <-u-v^a>.
5. The (presumed) short diphthongs /ai/ and /au/ are written as <-C^a-i> und <C^a-u>, and are thus only partially differentiated from the simple vowels. <d^a-i> = [dai], but <dⁱ-i> = [di] or [dī], and <t^a-i> = [tai], [ti] or [tī]. In word-final position, an additional <y> or <v> is written.
6. The (presumed) long diphthongs /āi/ and /āu/ are written <C^a-a-i> and <C^a-a-u> and thus quite clear, except in word-initial position, according to (1) above.
7. Syllabic /r/ is written <r> in word-internal position: <C^a-r-C> = [CrC]. In word-initial position, it is written exactly as are [ar] and [ār], and cannot be distinguished from these.
8. The nasals /m/ and /n/ are written before the consonant in very few special cases, for example <k^a-m^a-n^a> = /kamna-/ ‘few’; apart from this, they are not written at all. <b^a-r^a-tⁱ-y^a> thus can be read both as /barati/ ‘he/she/it bears, carries’ and as /baranti/ ‘they bear, carry’.
9. In word-final position, only the consonants <-m>, <-r> and <-š> are written. All others are not written in this position.
10. /y/ and /w/ are usually written <-i-y^a> and <-u-v^a>, respectively. <-C^{i/a}-i-y^a> = Ciy.
11. Iranian */h/ from Indo-Iranian */s/ is not written before ap. /u/, /ū/, /m/, and /r/. In the dialect known to us as ‘Old Persian’, /h/ in these positions seems to have disappeared.
12. Often the vowel /i/ is left out after the <h>-sign (but not always).

Now let us examine a similar, but older, system of writing, which is certainly of independent origin, to wit, Linear B. This, too, was not alphabetic in the sense that each symbol represented a phoneme of the language being written. Rather, it was a syllabary which used the occasional ideogramme.²⁸ Linear B would seem to have

consonant, V = any vowel; the inherent vowel in any sign is given in superscript form: <C^a>, <Cⁱ>, and so on. Length of concrete vowel phonemes is indicated by a macron. (The question of what a consonant is, and what a vowel is, cannot be dealt with here.)

28 Cf. Bright/Daniels 1996, xliv.

been developed from an earlier writing system which also gave rise to Linear A (or 'Minoan') and to Cypriot. The entire group of scripts is commonly referred to as the 'Aegean scripts' for geographical reasons. Linear B was generally argillographic in application, but a few examples of brushwork on pots exist as well.²⁹

The basic rules for writing are as follows:³⁰

1. As far as can be ascertained, phonologically long and short vowels are not distinguished.
2. There is a symbol for each of the vowel phonemes (without regard to length, as mentioned in (1) above), used primarily in word-initial position: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. When one of these vowels occurs in non-initial position, following other signs, this probably indicates two syllables separated by hiatus or by the aspirate /h/ (for example: <ke-ke-me-na-o> = /k^hek^hemenāhōn/³¹). Vowels are otherwise inherent: <C^a> <C^e> <Cⁱ> <C^o> <C^u>, with the exceptions of *<j>, *<q^u>³², and *<w^u> (for phonetic reasons) and of *<zⁱ> and *<z^u> (for reasons unknown to us).
3. The occurrence of <u> t in non-initial position (<C^a-u>, <C^e-u>, <C^o-u>) seems to indicate the corresponding diphthong, e.g. <qa-si-re-u>, classical βασιλεύς.³³ On tablets from Mainland Greece, diphthongs containing /i/ are generally not written with Linear B <i>; on tablets from Knossos on Crete this <i> is generally written. Examples: Pylos (mainland) <ko-to-na> (PY Aq 64), Knossos (Crete) <ko-to-no-i-na> (KN Uf 1031), but also Knossos <a-na-ta> (KN Sf 4420) and <a-na-i-ta> (KN Sf 4419), Mycenae (mainland) <ko-no> (MY Ge 602) and <ko-i-no> (MY Ge 606); <e-u-me-de-i> (PY Fr 1184) shows two diphthongs.³⁴
4. With the exception of the dental³⁵ plosive phonemes /d/ and /t/, voiced and voiceless plosives are not distinguished in the writing. There is one sign each for /k/ /k^h/ /g/, /p/ /p^h/ /b/, /t/ /t^h/ (classical κ χ γ, π φ β, τ θ).
5. The continuant phonemes /r/ and /l/ are represented by the same series of signs, i.e. they are not distinguished in the writing.

²⁹ Cf. Bennett 1996, 1256, as well as Hiller/Panagl 1986, 50 ff.

³⁰ Linear B tablet numbers are given as in Ventris/Chadwick 19732, Glossary; the list of tablets is not exhaustive; rather, the intention is to supply examples.

³¹ Cf. Bennett 1996, 130.

³² <q> represents the voiced and voiceless labiovelar sounds in Mycenaean, similar to <qv> in Classical Latin (qvi, qva, qvae, loqvi and so forth) and <gv> in Old Italian (e.g. from a document dated to 1158 *guaita* 'guard, Wacht', cf. Pulgram 1978, 345–346) or <gu> in Modern Italian and Spanish, e.g. *guerra*.

³³ Cf. Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 576, under the heading *qa-si-re-u* for individual tablets as sources for this word.

³⁴ Cf. Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 42–48 on the system of writing and the examples, and the glossary in Ventris/Chadwick 1973 for the individual tablets.

³⁵ Possibly alveodental, but we can recognise only the general phonetic nature. Any phonetic conclusions drawn from extant forms of Greek are hardly applicable to a stage of the language as (imperfectly) recorded some 3000 years ago.

6. There are 9 signs altogether that represent consonantal /u/, i.e. /w/. Four of these form the w-series: <w^a> <w^e> <wⁱ> <w^o> (but, as noted above, no *<w^u>); four represent dental plosives followed by /w/: <dw^e> <dw^o> <tw^e> <tw^o>; and one represents the alveolar nasal /n/ followed by /w/: <nw^a>. (One may note in passing the phonetic similarity between, on the one hand, [alveo]dental plosives, voiced and voiceless, and, on the other, the alveolar nasal.)
7. The signs representing the diphthongs <ai> (<a₃>) and <au> occur in word-initial position only.
8. The palatal approximant /j/ (if it was this, cf. footnote 33) is consistently represented. Vowels following syllables with -i- are generally represented by <jV>, e.g. <i-je-re-u> (KN Am 821, PY Aq 218) = ἱερεύς; those following syllables with -u- are generally represented by <wV>, e.g. <ku-wa-ni-jo> (PY Ta 714 = χυάνεος).
9. Plene spellings are very common, and used to represent consonant clusters, e.g. <a-re-ku-tu-ru-wo> (PY An 654) for Ἀλεκτρύων. Usually the vowel of the syllable involved is used, as in this example, where the syllabification is [a :: le :: ktru :: ōn].
10. The basic structure of the syllables represented by the signs is V or CV; CVC does not occur.
11. Initial /s/ before a stop consonant is consistently omitted in writing.
12. Consonants in word-final position or in syllabic coda are not written. This covers those cases where a syllabic divide lies in the midst of what would otherwise be a consonant cluster, and the first consonant of the cluster is therefore not written. Examples: <ka-ko> (PY Jn 389, PY Sa 794) = χαλκός, χαλκῶ; <a-pi> (KN G 820, PY Ta 716) = ἀμφί; <pa-ka-na> (KN Ra 1540) = φάσγανα; <a-to-ro-qo> (PY Ta 722) = ἄνθρωπος, ἄνθρωποι; <pa-te> (PY An 607) = πατήρ; <a-ku-ro> (PY Sa 287) = ἄργυρος, ἄργύρωι.

A brief comparison of the orthographical rules of both systems yields a few similarities, some of which are interesting. These are:

1. Both systems use clay tablets as writing surfaces for the most part.
2. Both systems use signs representing syllables of the structures V or CV only. CVC and VC do not occur.
3. Both systems do not distinguish between phonologically long and short vowels.
4. Both systems represent /j/ and /w/ with a high degree of consistency.
5. Both systems tend to use plene spellings to represent consonant clusters and diphthongs, although not entirely consistently.
6. The aspirate /h/ tends not to be represented in the writing of either system. In both cases the very existence of this phoneme is uncertain.
7. The continuant phonemes /r/ and /l/ are represented identically within each system; there is no differentiation on the level of the syllable signs.
8. Significantly, both systems do *not* use *scriptio continua*. In Linear B, a word divider is used to denote separate words, or the signs change in height from word to word,

or there is a space between the words. In Old Persian, there is a word divider or a space between words.

9. Nasal phonemes /m/ and /n/ are often unwritten before other consonants.
10. Both systems are written from left to right.

Naturally these similarities are not necessarily all of significance; most are conditioned by the phoneme systems of the respective languages. Linear B is also influenced by evidently having been developed from a writing system originally intended for a quite different language, of which we unfortunately know next to nothing. Even so, the fact that there seems to be an awareness of certain units of speech in both systems is remarkable. In the later Greek and Roman classical world, for example, *scriptio continua* remained the norm for many centuries, before separate units became the standard.

Certain habits which appear clumsy to us are also common to both systems of writing, in particular the non-representation of consonants before other consonants. This would indicate that, in fact, such non-representation did not cause any difficulty at all.

The more obvious similarities in writing materials and direction of writing need not be examined, as they are highly likely to be trivial (although perhaps revealing something of the previous traditions). The main point here is that both systems were clearly intended to be read, not just written, and they were designed to be read with a fairly high degree of efficiency. One need only compare English orthography of the present day, for instance, to see that these ancient systems of writing are by no means inferior.

Most interesting is that these two systems display so many points in common, or at least partially so. This is surely indicative of a certain efficiency in fulfilling the intended task in each case.³⁶ Equally of interest to us is the fact that neither system survived to be used later. In the case of Mycenaean Greek, the dialect itself—evidently most closely related to the later Arcado-Cypriot complex—apparently did not survive the end of the palaces and their centralised economies.³⁷ Nevertheless, the writing might have survived under other circumstances. But it seems that the very centralisation of the economy in Mycenaean Greece may have entailed a corresponding specialisation in the matter of writing and scribal schools, among other things. The violent destruction of the Mycenaean centres meant also the destruction of much of the tangible and intangible infrastructure, including, very probably, all of that needed to support such specialist areas as scribal schools. The only Aegean script to survive into later, alphabetic times is the Cypriot variant, which was still in use in the Hellenistic

³⁶ Cf. Miller 1994, chapter 2, for a detailed and enlightening analysis of Linear B and its effectiveness as a writing system.

³⁷ Cf. Hiller/Panagl 1986, 315–328, and Heubeck 1966, 10–11.

period. This is oddly striking, as it would seem that the Greek adaptation of one or more Semitic writing systems also took place in the Eastern Mediterranean (perhaps on Cyprus itself).³⁸

In the case of Old Persian, the language of the inscriptions clearly did not survive either. This statement may come as a surprise; yet the term ‘survive’ is what clouds the issue. We use it generally, as we do many metaphors relating to biology.³⁹ But we should not forget that languages neither survive nor die; only their speakers do so, with corresponding effects on their social organisations. Old Persian, in the form transmitted to us in the inscriptions (first and foremost the Bisitūn inscription, as the most extensive and probably earliest in date), was no longer the language of the scribes of the Late Achaemenid tradition. This is shown by some of the late inscriptions, with their blatant grammatical errors.⁴⁰ In short, language change had made obsolete the written form that we might term ‘classical’ Old Persian, i.e. that language used in the inscriptions of Dareios I and his son Xerxes, itself perhaps a rather artificial form.

So, to sum up, both systems worked more than tolerably well from the standpoint of those who used them; both systems ceased to be used, although it is conceivable that they could have been further used. On the surface, one might point out that the Achaemenid Empire was also violently destroyed by Alexander’s armies, but this is a different matter to the more ancient demise of the Mycenaean world. Individual cities and sites in Achaemenid Persia and elsewhere certainly suffered violent destruction (not least Persepolis itself), but clearly the infrastructure, tangible and intangible, did not, as a whole. Yet the Old Persian writing system had not been able to assert itself against other systems, notably the Aramaic; it ceased to be used altogether after Alexander’s conquest, and slipped into oblivion. But was this really because it was not as good a system? The same question could theoretically be put with regard to Linear B—what if the Mycenaean world had not suffered such a catastrophic end as seems to have been the case?

We have seen above that the materials used for writing cannot have been the decisive factor, nor can the writing system itself be blamed, as it were. So what exactly were the important factors that played a part in the decline of the Old Persian writing system, and did these factors aid Aramaic in its ascendancy?

To try to answer this, we must again go a little further afield. To start with, there is the matter of the circles in which Old Persian writing was used. Clearly, no matter

³⁸ Cf. Jeffery 1990, 5–12.

³⁹ We talk, too, of ‘genetically related’ languages, but we do not refer to actual genetics. This entire area of issues and problems is, of course, conditioned by the history of science. It is useful to keep in mind that we are dealing with metaphors in such cases.

⁴⁰ Cf. Schmitt 1999, 59–118: ‘5. Das spätachaimenidische Altpersisch’, for an extremely detailed and valuable description and analysis.

what scenarios we construct on the basis of such finds as Fortification Tablet 1208-101 (see above), in the end we are faced with writing used for the purposes of a very limited social group indeed, namely that including the king. This conclusion, of course, is anything but new. However, the purposes themselves must be briefly examined, in that we postulate possible uses for written texts with regard to this social group or class.

We know that the administrative texts were part of a complex system of archiving and controlling various resources. Just as in modern administrations, copies were made, confirmations of receipt written, and files organised.⁴¹ The Persepolis Fortification Tablets provide a unique window to the actual mechanics of rule under Dareios I for the period between approximately 509 and 494 BC.⁴² The greater number of tablets is in Elamite; the next largest group is in Aramaic. We may thus presume that Elamite and Aramaic were both important, but we may not simply assume that other languages did not enjoy an importance approaching, or equal to, these two. In fact, we must content ourselves with establishing that the only clear facts are that the archive is multilingual, that Old Persian and other languages apart from Elamite and Aramaic do appear in it, and that the purpose of the archive is clearly and purely practical, serving the needs of Dareios' administration of the Achaimenid Empire.

A second use of the script is one that has been known much longer. Indeed, the main monument attesting this use was chronologically earlier than the Persepolis Fortification tablets. I refer here, of course, to the first and greatest of the Old Persian inscriptions, that of Dareios I at Bisitūn. Ever since the decipherment of Old Persian,⁴³ there has been much discussion on the whys and wherefores of this inscription. If we distill what has been concluded thus far, we might say that the inscription was obviously not designed to be read *on the cliff face where it was carved*; we know that the Old Persian inscription was originally not intended at all (the Elamite and Achaimenid Akkadian versions were the original inscriptions);⁴⁴ and we have clear indications that the Old Persian writing system used at this site was, in fact, not the result of a long evolution,⁴⁵ but rather appears to have been the short-term, albeit relatively well thought-out, result of the work of a committee, for lack of a better word. The roots of the writing system may, of course, be older: there is some reason to think that the beginnings of it lie in the reign of Kyros.⁴⁶ Whatever the case may be, it appears that the entire ensemble of inscriptions at Bisitūn was intended to impress, what one

⁴¹ Cf. Koch 1992, 32–36 for examples.

⁴² See Stein 2003–2004, 122.

⁴³ This decipherment can be regarded as complete from 1846–1847, the date of publication of the inscription by Rawlinson 1850.

⁴⁴ Cf. Schmitt 1991, 18–19; Koch 1992, 18–20; and Lewis 1996, 20 and note 16.

⁴⁵ Cf. Testen 1996, 134.

⁴⁶ Cf. Schmitt 2004, 721–722.

might almost call a ‘secondary kind of iconicity’.⁴⁷ The idea will certainly have been to demonstrate the power of the king. This was achieved by the simple fact that a huge, widely visible ‘sign’ was set in the cliff face at Bisitūn.⁴⁸ It was clearly not expected that anyone would read this particular text exemplar; equally, copies were distributed throughout the Empire and were available to read for those few who were literate—however, the one copy we have is not in Old Persian, but in Aramaic.⁴⁹ It is possible that copies in various languages were prepared; we are only certain of the Aramaic. That Aramaic should be the language of choice throughout non-Iranian (most especially, non-Persian) parts of the Achaimenid Empire is not surprising. By the end of the eighth century BC, it appears, Aramaic had already achieved a dominant status in the northern Levant and some parts of Mesopotamia;⁵⁰ the westward expansion of the Medes and later the Persians seems to have led these two ruling groups to adopt Aramaic for the purposes of the administration of the wider empire.

The Persian rulers, and the Medes before them, had no need for a written version of their own languages. One has the impression that bi- or multilingualism must, to some degree, have been usual among both the conquerors and the conquered. As administrative structures were already present—in Elam, but also further west in Babylon and other regions—there was at first perhaps no need for the Medes and Persians themselves to do any of the day-to-day work of governing. It will at first have been a matter of tribute, surely, much as had been the case with the Assyrian Empire. Only gradually may it have occurred to the new rulers that more control could entail more profit. In any event, it was not until the time of Dareios I that the need for a writing system for Old Persian seems to have been felt. It may be significant that the Persians had conquered Egypt by this time. Where the Mesopotamian conquests may not have been all that impressive from the point of view of written monuments (or monuments with writing on them), Egypt most certainly was. It cannot have been lost on the Persian kings, from Cambyses onward, that one of the keys to power in Egypt was certainly writing.

The basic system of Persian rule in Egypt during the first period of Persian dominance was, in effect, to have the Persian Great King declared Pharaoh, with all the usual rituals. Indeed, Cambyses carried out at least one very important ritual as part of a policy designed to give the natives no cause for resentment. Since the priesthood in Egypt was a major part of the administrative apparatus, and since the Persians wished to keep this apparatus in place more or less unchanged, as they had done

⁴⁷ See Nöth 2000, 193 ff. on icons and iconicity.

⁴⁸ There were doubtless sound reasons for Dareios to choose Bisitūn, but these are not germane to the matter under discussion here.

⁴⁹ First published by Sachau 1911. *Aramäische Papyrus und Ostraka aus einer jüdischen Militär-Kolonie zu Elephantine*, Leipzig, 1911. (Sims-Williams 1981, 1; note 1.).

⁵⁰ Cf. O’Connor 1996, 96.

elsewhere, it made sense not to alienate the priests if at all possible. The Persian representative, the satrap (a sort of viceroy), was under close control of the Great King in the Persis; in turn, the satrap had a chancellor to take care of central government, and this chancellor had a staff of Egyptian translators, as the administration below this level was the old Egyptian one.⁵¹ The Persian ruling class cannot have failed to notice the huge number of imposing monuments, virtually all of which had writing on them. They will have already noticed the power that the scribes in their own homeland possessed, and this power will have been demonstrated to them again in Egypt, indeed doubly so. Is it perhaps possible that the germ of an idea began to sprout? It is difficult to say.

We thus know that the script was used for royal purposes in the wider sense; administrative tasks on the one hand, monumental display on the other.

What we also see (or think we see, at any rate) is a situation where literacy was already present, but it was a foreign literacy from the Persian standpoint—Elamite, Aramaic, Greek, Akkadian, Egyptian, and possibly others. A large and very imposing monument is designed on the orders of the Great King; at some point during the construction of this monument, the Great King decides to have part of the inscriptions set out in his own native language. A writing system that may already have been in the course of development is thereupon created or finished, and is used for the Old Persian portion of the monument. Somewhat later, it is noticed that the script could perhaps be used for more mundane purposes, and it is also thus used. But these purposes are connected geographically with the Persis; there is no evidence from elsewhere in the Achaimenid world that the Old Persian script was ever used for other than monumental purposes. This is, however, an *argumentum ex silentio*, and should therefore not be trusted entirely. The scenario may have been more along the lines of an attempt at using the script which failed for lack of acceptance.

Basically, there was something equally good already available. As mentioned above, there is no reason to suppose that Old Persian could not have been written with Aramaic script, at least in daily situations of a non-royal nature; this would go some way towards explaining the ascendancy of Aramaic scripts in the Middle Iranian period. Old Persian writing as employed by Dareios I and his successors was simply too late on the scene to make much difference; cuneiform, whether Mesopotamian or Elamite, cannot have held all that much of its old prestige at this point either, as the political situation had not exactly changed in favour of the former powers that had used cuneiform. The Old Persian writing system may represent an attempt to continue an old tradition, in the sense that cuneiform (or something looking very much like it) would certainly be iconic in a secondary or indirect sense, i.e. it would be associated with power and strength. The winged bull-headed statues at Persepolis are a clear indication that Mesopotamian topoi were still effective. But it would have been clear,

⁵¹ This description of Egyptian history at this period after Lloyd 2000, 374–377.

too, that Mesopotamia and its empires had, for all intents and purposes, run their course. This may also explain why Elamite no longer appears regularly after about the middle of the fifth century BC, and the last few examples date from the time of Artaxerxes III (358-337 BC).⁵² The old things had lost their lustre; new things were taking over the function of prestige.

Another point is that the Achaimenid Empire was of relatively short duration, only a matter of some two centuries. Yes, it did leave the idea of a united state or polity under Persian rule as a legacy, but the ruling dynasty and its immediate underlings may have made up too small a group to successfully impose a system of writing ‘from above’.

Over four decades ago, Igor Diakonoff made the suggestion⁵³ that the Old Persian script was the result of using at least two very different writing systems as a template: Mesopotamian cuneiform on the one hand, and Aramaic on the other. This suggestion has not really been taken up in the meantime; it is, nevertheless, well worth considering. It would mean that Aramaic writing (and the Aramaic language) was well known to the Persians of the time, which is not at all improbable. Another factor is perhaps the desire to set themselves apart from the Elamites in this way: it has always been a matter of some puzzlement as to why the Persians did not, in the beginning, take over the Elamite version of cuneiform. Yet the Persian kings did call themselves, among other titles, ‘King of Anshan’, the old Elamite capital.

One thing that must be considered, too, is the relative importance or unimportance of semanticity in the matter of writing. For us, transmitting meaning is the primary purpose of written communication. Writing, for a long time, was part and parcel of overcoming distance in communication. It was the only way—for a very long time—of transmitting complex communications over distances (and over time). What we do tend to forget, however, is that reification⁵⁴ of spoken language, i.e. ‘rendering material’ that which seems immaterial, has more than one consequence. Among the various effects is a secondary iconisation. The piece of writing itself, the material upon which the communication is set down in writing, and thus the writing itself, come to signify something other than the communication contained. D. M. Lewis has made the cogent point that seals played an important role in Persian administration, so that the ‘top people [did] not need to be able to write at all’.⁵⁵

A key point in this connection must surely be the heterogeneous make-up of the Empire. When Pliny the Elder, in his *Naturalis historia*, liber VII, xxiv, mentions that ‘*Mithridates duarum et viginti gentium rex totidum linguis iura dixit, pro contione singu-*

⁵² Cf. Koch 2007, 181.

⁵³ Diakonoff 1970. In the same essay, he claims that Old Persian cuneiform was only suitable for argillographic purposes. This is probably not true, see above.

⁵⁴ See Nöth 2000, 358 for more on this and other terms.

⁵⁵ Lewis 1996.

las sine interprete adfatus’,⁵⁶ this reminds us of the situation under Achaimenid rule, too. It has always been apparent that Aramaic occupied a position of special importance within the Empire, and after it. Clearly there must have been relatively intensive contacts between Aramaic speakers (and writers) and the various peoples within the Empire who later wrote their own languages using scripts derived from the Aramaic.

A later parallel of sorts may be seen in the situation in Central Asia among the Sogdians and Uighurs. The Sogdian writing system comprised not just one, but at least three main variants of the original Aramaic script: one was the so-called ‘Sogdian script’, used in the Ancient Letters, the inscription of Kultobe,⁵⁷ the documents at Mount Muy, and in Buddhist writings, where the writing developed into the ‘formal’ or ‘sūtra’ script; one was Manichaean Sogdian, possibly an offshoot of the Palmyrene variant of Aramaic writing; and one was ‘Christian Sogdian’, possibly an offshoot of the Edessan variant of Aramaic writing.⁵⁸ Some Turkic peoples appear to have taken over the Sogdian script quite early on; the Bugut inscriptions show the use of not only the Sogdian script, but also the Sogdian language.⁵⁹ The script remained in use for centuries; indeed, distant descendants of it exist today in the form of the classical Mongolian script and the Manchu script.⁶⁰ Mixed Turco-Sogdian documents are known, and the linguistic and ethnic assimilation of the Sogdians has become clearer, too.⁶¹ In the main, one may maintain that politics played a major role; the Sogdian elements were never much concerned with more than local politics, as the evidence suggests; no major trading state or the like was ever founded by the Sogdians, nor was the Silk Road trade anywhere near as important as used to be assumed.⁶²

The Turkic tribes, however, did establish polities, some of them of astonishingly wide extent. The contacts with China, on the one hand, and with India—via Buddhism—and the Iranian west on the other, led to various languages and scripts being used.⁶³ In the end, although China was long the focus of attack and conquest, and the source of much trade (in horses,⁶⁴ for example), the Chinese system of writing did not prevail over the Sogdian; Brāhmī was certainly of great importance in Central Asia (one may think of Tocharian in this context, for example), yet it, too, did not prevail.

⁵⁶ ‘Mithridates, king of 22 peoples, gave judgements in as many languages, addressing each people in assembly without an interpreter.’ (Plinius 1989). *Pliny. Natural History II. Books III* Harvard University Press, reprinted 1989.

⁵⁷ See Sims-Williams/Grenet/Podushkin 2008 on Kultobe.

⁵⁸ Cf. for orientation the following: Skjærvø 1996, 515–520; Skjærvø 1996, 529–535; Kara 1996, 536–558; Hitch 2010; Baumstark 1968.

⁵⁹ Vaissière 2004, 182; Hitch 2010, 9–10.

⁶⁰ Vaissière 2004, 182. Cf. also G. Kara 1996, 545–554.

⁶¹ Cf. Hansen 2012, 195–196; Vaissière 2004, 294.

⁶² Cf. in general Hansen 2012.

⁶³ Cf. Zieme 1995, 153 ff. for some details of Old Turkish epic literature by way of illustration.

⁶⁴ Vaissière 2004, 190–194; Hansen 2012, 81.

What in fact has remained of all this is the result of various adaptations—for manifold historical reasons—of Aramaic script, to wit, the above-mentioned Mongolian and Manchu scripts, and Arabic (modern-day Uighur is written with the Arabic script). This last is, of course, the result of the Arab conquests in Central Asia in the early period of Islam.

The parallel is a good one, because in both the Achaimenid Empire and the Turkish polities of Central Asia in the first millennium of our era, the control of the local populations was not that intensive. This is also true of Chinese domination in those areas of Central Asia where the Tang dynasty (618-907) ruled; when this rule came to an end during the An Lushan rebellion of 755-763, Chinese influence more or less ceased and Tibetan influence (which did not leave much of a mark either) began.⁶⁵ All this tells us that empires do not necessarily have any great influence on cultures, unless their control is very intensive indeed. The Achaimenid Empire was not the Roman Empire, and, although a relatively sophisticated administrative system seems to have existed generally, there is a distinct probability that it was not equally sophisticated in each and every part of the far-flung territories the Persian Kings called theirs. In many cases, local rulers will doubtless have been left pretty much to their own devices, as long as they delivered the required tribute and caused the Persians no trouble. Sogdiana is probably a case in point, but other regions and territories were likely quite similar. A military presence was all that was needed; it may even have contributed more or less significantly to local economies, as was the case with the Tang armies of China in Central Asia.⁶⁶

In summary, we may conclude with quite a degree of justification that the Old Persian writing system never had a chance for two main reasons. It was designed for a limited application—only one language, and that language, albeit very important politically, was not widespread.⁶⁷ It was a latecomer to the world of writing at the time, Aramaic writing having already become established. A number of less important factors will have played a role, too. Aramaic writing may have been able to establish itself with such success precisely because it was not directly associated with political power, i.e. it was not the official language of any one group of rulers; rather, it was used for communications among different groups speaking different languages, something that Old Persian was not. Yet the very fact, too, that Aramaic was indirectly associated

⁶⁵ Cf. Hansen 2012, 156–158.

⁶⁶ Cf. Hansen 2012, 79 ff.; Hansen 2012, 94 ff.; Hansen 2012, 184 ff.; Hansen 2012, 237.

⁶⁷ Cf. Schmitt 2011, 314: “Das Altpersische war die ‘Sprache des achaimenidischen Königtums’, die *ad maiorem regis gloriam* diente, während für den interregionalen Verkehr innerhalb des Reiches eine andere Sprache, nämlich das zu den semitischen Sprachen zählende Aramäische schon nach Ausweis der Verbreitung und der Art der Textzeugnisse die Hauptrolle spielte. Das Aramäische war die Sprache, die das Reich wie mit einer Klammer zusammengehalten hat.”

with the Achaimenid kings may have given it a prestige which actually was of great help in establishing its writing system as a standard. Paradoxically, the attempts by the Persian kings to give their language its very own writing system apparently have led to a long history of xenography, culminating in the use of the Arabic script, itself of Aramaic lineage, being used for Modern Persian.

One might say that Old Persian cuneiform, for all its iconic status, lost out to semanticity, and then suffered the fate of those cuneiform languages which it was intended to dominate, being ousted by the very fact that its rival, Aramaic, had been so widely used by the creators of Old Persian writing themselves. Despite the material magnificence of their place of transmission, the proud words of Dareios I, cited in the title of this contribution, would thus have to wait for nearly two and a half thousand years before anyone was again able to read them.

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Christoph Mauntel

Charters, Pitchforks, and Green Seals*

Written Documents between Text and Materiality in Late Medieval Revolts

During the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England, the insurgents assaulted and looted the house of Admiral Edmund de la Mare in Peldon, about 100 kilometres northeast of London. One of them, Ralph atte Wode, grabbed a file of official documents and impaled them on his pitchfork. Together with other insurgents, he carried them all the way to London in order to see the king and present his demands.¹

When we think of objects that were usually impaled in medieval times, the heads of decapitated criminals or traitors spring to mind. Fixing an object on a lance or a stick primarily answered the purpose of making it widely seen and, in the case of a decapitated head, making the death of a person publicly known.² The display of body parts was likewise a symbol of the triumph of justice and at the same time a warning: city gates with decapitated heads on them were a common sight in the Middle Ages and served as a deterrent to every newcomer or visitor.³ Impaled charters, however, do not seem to fit into this picture of triumphant or daunting acts.

This essay examines the function or significance that insurgents attributed to written documents during revolts in the late Middle Ages. In so doing, it approaches the topic of this volume through the back door. It is very difficult to estimate literacy rates for the late Middle Ages, but one can assume that large parts of society were not able to read and write fluently. The dichotomy between the specific content of a doc-

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1 *...et libri domini Regis a domo dicti Edmundi usque le Mile End super unum longum furcum felonice portandum coram domino Rege*. London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/6/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 210; cf. also Prescott 1984, 100–101 and 136. Cf. Justice 1994, 40, 46, and 71.

2 For decapitation as punishment, cf. Gonthier 1998, 151–156.

3 The gates of *London Bridge*, until 1739 the only bridge over the river Thames, were regularly used to display the heads or extremities of executed men, Eaton 1996, 47. This act of punishment was deliberately imitated by the insurgents in 1381: The Westminster chronicle, 6; Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 450, 480, and 484; The Anonimale Chronicle, 135, 145, and 151; Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II., 27; Froissart, Chroniques, vol. 10, 111. Cf. Mauntel 2012, 111–112; Eiden 1995, 299–301.

ument and its use as a symbolic object of literacy, or any legal order in general, therefore deserves special focus. Firstly, I will briefly outline the current state of research concerning literacy and medieval forms of protest (part 1). I will follow this with an analysis in three steps, considering how the insurgents demanded the surrender of certain documents, either to use or to destroy them (part 2), how they later asked for the written affirmation of their recently gained privileges (part 3), and how the authorities ‘responded’ to this threat with similar practices of symbolic acting (part 4).

1 Literacy—Visibility—Credibility

In the late Middle Ages, written documents were widely distributed and common even among merchants and craftsmen.⁴ All over Europe, law and government increasingly depended on written records, as did trade and diplomacy.⁵ How literate medieval and early-modern societies really were is, however, still a matter of scholarly debate.⁶ Apart from methodological problems in estimating literacy rates, it remains questionable how to define ‘literacy’ in societies where texts were frequently presented and read aloud in public.⁷ Against this background, Malcolm Richardson, for example, characterised medieval England as a society “highly involved in a culture of pervasive literate practices.”⁸ Thus, the ability to read (or even write) is not the only indicator for the degree to which a given society was accustomed to using and handling written documents—and, even more important, willing to rely on them. It was, first and foremost, trust in the efficiency and potency of written charters and agreements that was pervasive in late medieval Europe.⁹

⁴ This was famously pointed out by Clanchy 1993, with regard to medieval England, and by Robins 2011, 11–13, with regard to Italy.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Arlinghaus 2000; Richardson 2011; Jucker 2008.

⁶ By counting how many people marked rather than signed legal records in England in the 1640s, Cressy 1980, concluded that about 70 percent of the population were illiterate (and up to 90 percent of the women). This, however, only hints at the ability to write, not at literacy as such, which was far more common, *ibid.*, 132–136. Cf. Brayman Hackel 2004, 169–171. In contrast, Clanchy 1993, and Robins 2011 asserted that literacy grew in urban centres beginning in the 12th century, and was quite common by the 14th century. Cf. Richardson 2011, e.g. 17: “By 1350, writing had become an essential tool for urban tradesmen.” Cf. also Justice 1994, 32–38.

⁷ Clanchy 1993, 2–11. Cf. Richardson 2011, 9; Justice 1994, 52.

⁸ Richardson 2011, 3–4.

⁹ The term ‘trust’ can be understood as “a specific combination of cultural practices, of emotional and rational phenomena, and of specific ideas and values connected with these practices and phenomena. Theories of trust might serve as a tool to become aware of the human ability to cooperate.” Weltecke 2008, 391, with further references. For trust in writing, cf. Schulte 2008, 6–12, and Clanchy 1993, 294–327; for strategies of securing this trust, cf. Mostert 2008.

To secure this trust, distinguishing signs of authenticity (like signatures, monographs, and seals) developed from the early Middle Ages onwards, as did symbolic practices of confirmation.¹⁰ Back then, in a mostly illiterate society, the presentation and public display of documents was of primary importance. Especially for the Early and High Middle Ages, many studies have pointed out that the confirmation and handing over of charters was often carried out in public. The document itself thus gained significance as a material object far beyond its actual legal content, and played a crucial role in public ceremonies:¹¹ Charters were confirmed by signature or seal, presented to the public, read aloud, handed over, touched, sworn on, and kissed.¹² At the same time, this performative use had an effect on the charters' design, as Peter Rück stated: Although parchment was expensive, it was used for charters in almost lavishly generous dimensions and was in addition inscribed only on one side. Rück interpreted the charters' increase in size, ornateness, and affirmation of authenticity from the 10th century as linked to their function in public ceremonies and thus as a hint at the visual culture of the Middle Ages.¹³

Thus, even if 'literacy' by modern standards was quite limited, written documents enjoyed an aura of credibility and reliability. People were indeed well aware of their importance as well as their material characteristics, as this essay will demonstrate. To do so, it focuses on late medieval revolts. As a counterpart to public ceremonies arranged by the authorities, revolts offer a unique insight into the way the people acted and which objects or actions they attributed significance to. The idea that insurgents relied heavily on symbolic actions is, however, far from new. František Graus, in 1987, referred to "stereotypical sequences of events"¹⁴ in uprisings. In his monograph on medieval revolts, Samuel Cohn took these ideas up and underlined the importance of symbolic acts and objects (particularly flags), both in Italy and north of the Alps.¹⁵ In the context of the uprising of the French rural population in 1358, known as the *Jacquerie* and commonly seen as the example par excellence of a brutal and arbitrary eruption of violence,¹⁶ Bettina Bommersbach noted that the revolt was marked by

¹⁰ Keller 2004, esp. 309–311; Rauschert 2003, 169–173.

¹¹ Arlinghaus 2004, 393, called this "Statuszuweisung in der Kommunikation". Cf. also Keller 2011, esp. 76–77; Schulte 2006, 200–204; Mente 2004, 431, and Declercq 2011.

¹² Keller 2011, 86; Mente 2004, 431. Declercq 2011 argued that touching a charter was of outstanding importance as a sign of affirmation and acceptance until the High Middle Ages.

¹³ Rück 1991, 333, famously stated that "aus den langen Präsentiertischen urkundlicher Schriftlichkeit [of the Carolingians, cm] werden hochragende romanische Textfassaden." Cf. Keller 2004, 309–310; Keller 2011, 105.

¹⁴ Graus 1987, 499.

¹⁵ Cohn 2006, 177–204.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Dommanget 1971, 80: "C'est folie de rechercher dans cette tornade qui, en balayant une partie de la France, renverse tout sur son passage, à la fois une cause extérieure et un sens politique."

concerted and symbolic acts of destruction rather than by random violence.¹⁷ Striving for legitimacy and approval, the rebels often imitated the authorities' actions to prove the righteousness of their cause.¹⁸

The importance of literacy and the symbolic uses of written documents in medieval diplomacy have already been studied intensely, e.g. within the German Collaborative Research Centre 231 "Pragmatic Literacy", in Münster (1986–1999).¹⁹ Whereas in most cases the specific content of a document was of primary importance (e.g. in Neuenburg in 1406, where a falsified version of the municipal law was publicly destroyed²⁰), my interest is in the dichotomy between the content and materiality of written documents: It is unlikely that Ralph atte Wode read the documents he seized in Edmund de la Mare's manor before he took them. Only their character as 'official records' (*libri domini regi*) was of significance to him.²¹ However, the question of the extent to which literacy was important for the insurgents is to be kept in mind.

As a detailed description of the insurgents' actions is an indispensable precondition of any in-depth analyses of their practices, my focus is limited to urban revolts in late medieval Europe.²² In this epoch, uprisings are very well documented, both by historiographical accounts and legal records. These sources on uprisings clearly convey how important symbolic acts were during revolts. Although historiographical sources generally present insurgents as wild, brutal, and barbaric, their actions themselves reveal how purposefully and predictably they acted.²³

2 Seizing, Defiling and Destroying Documents

Referring to uprisings, the sources frequently report that the insurgents intentionally set fire to manorial or monastic archives and thus destroyed all sorts of documents and records.²⁴ Through a close examination of the sources, it becomes clear that the

¹⁷ Cf. Bommersbach 2008.

¹⁸ Cf. Mauntel 2012.

¹⁹ For an introductory overview see Keller/Worstbrock 1988 and Keller 2011, as well as the essays in Keller/Grubmüller/Staubach 1992 and Meier/Honemann/Keller 2002.

²⁰ *Also wart der brief zerschnitten und dem herren in sin hant geben.* Justinger, *Berner-Chronik*, 200, cf. Mente 2004, 437.

²¹ Cf. Justice 1994, 46–47.

²² Most examples I use for this essay refer to the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, but I will also rely on French and Italian examples. The examples are not based on a systematic study, but are thought to show the similarity of forms of protest in different regions throughout Europe, cf. Adamska/Mostert 2006, 709.

²³ Cf. e.g. Mauntel 2012, 95–102; Baraz 2003, 124–136. Justice 1994, 207, interprets this as a strategy of the chroniclers to cover up the people's comprehension of administrative practices.

²⁴ For the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 see Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 414 and 420; *The Anonimale Chronicle*, 140–141; *Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II*, 26 and 30–31; *The Brut*, 337. These burnings

burning of archives should not be understood as an act of random vandalism, but as a systematic and tactical move. For example, in 1381, the rebellious English population primarily demanded an improvement in their legal position (e.g. the abolition of bondage).²⁵ They were well aware that the detested duties and services they owed their lords were fixed in written documents. Thomas Walsingham, a Benedictine living in St. Albans Abbey (35 km northwest of London), wrote one of the most detailed accounts of the Peasants' Revolt. He reported that the rebels decided

to set to fire all court rolls and muniments, so that after they had got rid of these records of their ancient service their lords would not be able to claim any right at all against them at some future time; so that is what they did.²⁶

This example shows that the English society of the late 14th century already broadly relied on written documents: obligations and privileges were written down and were legally binding. Furthermore, the people knew that they were stored in manorial archives. The burning of those records did not nullify the service obligations, but made it impossible for the nobles to prove any claims against the local population. Thus, the destruction of a document rendered the claim therein virtually invalid.²⁷ For the same reason, tax records became another main target of the insurgents. Facing a similar situation during a revolt in Paris in 1382, Michel Pintoin, a monk and chronicler of the famous abbey of St. Denis, described the “irreparable harm” that could have resulted from the loss of those charters, if they had not been restored by the king after the revolt.²⁸ The people as well as the clergy and the nobility relied on the

are also mentioned in legal records: Calendar of the Close Rolls, vol. 2, 27, 75, 83, and 89; Réville 1898, 188–189, 218, 220, and 284; Rotuli parliamentorum, vol. 3, 106 (no. 45). Archives were burned as well during the Jacquerie in France in 1358, but presumably less often: Bommersbach 2008, 55; Luce 1894, 83–84; Dommanget 1971, 81–82. Cf. also Cohn 2004, 273, 277, 290, 292, and 295; Justice 1994, 40–45 (for England); Mente 2004, 431 (for Switzerland) and van Leeuwen 2008, 312–316 (for Flanders). For the notion of ‘destruction’ or ‘damaging’, see Mauntel et al. 2015.

25 For the demands of the insurgent cf. Eiden 1995, 415–425.

26 *Statuerunt omnes curiarum rotulos et munimenta uetera dare flammis, ut, obsoleta antiquarum rerum memoria, nullum ius omnino ipsorum domini in eos in posterum uendicare ualerent; factumque est ita.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 414, translation 415.

27 Insurgents in Bruges in 1477 similarly took possession of the original charter of the Peace of Arras (1438), which they wanted abolished: “By taking the original document to Bruges, trust was established that the detested regulation was really abolished, as all official evidence of the privilege was to be destroyed.” Van Leeuwen 2008, 310.

28 *Ad sanctum Audoenum accedentes, quoniam religiosi privilegia contra cives observantes iudicalem obtinuerant sententiam, nephandissimi viri et divina animadversione digni, turrim Cartarum violenter ingressi, privilegia distrahunt et disrumpunt, dampnum utique irreparabile perpetrando, nisi majestas regia illa postmodum confirmasset.* Chronique du Religieux, vol. 1, 132.

preserving power of written records. This made them of prime interest to insurgents striving to improve their lot.²⁹

It is therefore not surprising that the rebels (rather than destroying entire archives) sometimes demanded specific records be handed over to them. Thomas Walsingham was an eyewitness in 1381, when local peasants and townspeople turned against the abbey of St. Albans to which they owed services. The insurgents discussed their demands and presented them to the abbot.³⁰ Frightened by their anger, he agreed to meet these demands, but “these acts were insufficient to satisfy this disorderly mob”, as Walsingham recounts. Furthermore, they demanded to be given “an ancient charter about the liberties of the villeins, whose capital letters [they said] were alternately gold and azure.”³¹

With this demand, the people referred to a local belief that King Offa of Mercia (d. ca. 799), who was said to have founded the abbey, had issued a charter granting the local population extensive liberties, of which they now felt they had been deprived.³² The myth of such ‘ancient liberties’ was quite common throughout medieval Europe, and arose from the idea of a former ‘golden age’, in comparison to which the dull present was in many ways imagined as a change for the worse.³³ The abbot of St. Albans, however, replied that he knew nothing of such a charter, although he agreed to search for it. The conflict around the alleged ancient charter continued for several days: the monks said they could not find the charter, the insurgents in turn did not believe them.³⁴ In the end, the abbey issued a new charter wherein the monks confirmed that they could not find any charter of King Offa, but that if they found it subsequently, they would hand it over to the townsmen.³⁵ Of special interest here is

²⁹ For Flemish examples see van Leeuwen 2008, 312–316.

³⁰ The demands primarily related to the common use of land around the town and to the construction of hand-mills, Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 442.

³¹ *Set ista sufficere non ualebant indisciplinato populo quin quamdam cartam antiquam reposcerent de libertatibus uillanorum cuius littere capitales fuerunt, de auro una, altera de azorio, sine qua non posse satisfieri uotis populi asserebant.* Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 456, translation 457. Cf. Justice 1994, 47–48 and 171–172.

³² Walsingham, *Gesta*, vol. 3, 365.

³³ Graus 1988; for a critical perspective see Cohn 2006, 135–141.

³⁴ Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 456–472. For the topic of missing charters in monastic archives see Sennis 2013, 151–155 and 160–164.

³⁵ Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 460–462. The collective memory of specific rights also played a role in an uprising in Bern in 1364: the community demanded the removal of the acting sheriff and in so doing referred to a specific charter (the *Berner Handfeste*); assuming the content of the charter would prove their lawful claim, they demanded that the charter be read publicly. In the account of the chronicler Conrad Justinger, the town clerk at first pretended that he could not find the relevant paragraph. The town clerk only ‘found’ the passage after a man threw rotten cherries at the charter. Justinger, *Berner-Chronik*, 123, cited in Rauschert 2003, 174–177. It is noteworthy that the pollution of the document did not have any impact on its validity (cf. note 50). For further examples of deliberate hiding of documents cf. Mente 2004 and Weber 2011.

less the question of ancient liberties, than the pretended collective memory, referring quite precisely to a specific charter with gold and azure letters. Instead of enumerating specific liberties to which they claimed to be entitled, the insurgents described the outer appearance of the ancient charter. Its elaborate design (gold and azure were expensive colours) indicated the importance and authenticity of the charter.³⁶ We do not know whether the insurgents referred to a ‘real’ charter that might have been publicly shown in the past, or if they just described an imagined charter (on another occasion, Walsingham grumbled about some “worthless old leaders”³⁷ who incited the younger villagers with stories of old privileges). In any case, if we trust Walsingham’s account, by describing a parchment with coloured display script, the insurgents chose to refer to the outer appearance of a charter rather than to its specific content. Thus, they revealed their understanding of what an ‘authentic’ charter should look like and signalled that its materiality was more significant than its actual content.³⁸

Farther east, in Bury St. Edmunds, the insurgents also demanded the surrender of all documents that might prove their bondage to the local monastery or the king. More specifically, they referred to an ancient charter, in which Cnut the Great (d. 1035), the founder of the local Benedictine abbey, had granted the town certain liberties.³⁹ In fear, the monks delivered “all the things which were demanded, things which could be both advantageous to the villeins or harmful to them”⁴⁰ and swore that these were all the charters they were able to find. The insurgents then consulted literates to check whether any of the charters included those liberties for which they longed.

Whilst the townspeople of St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds demanded specific charters from which they hoped to benefit, the insurgents in other places deliberately removed charters and records from archives. They mainly targeted documents concerning the local jurisdiction, tax lists, monastic privileges or juristic records.⁴¹ As an inversion of the public presentation and display of the records at the time they were

³⁶ Cf. van Leeuwen 2008, 308 (with Flemish examples).

³⁷ *Nequam senum primicerius*. Walsingham, *Gesta*, vol. 3, 365. For the relationship between memory and written records see Sennis 2013, esp. 152.

³⁸ Cf. Justice 1994, 36: “[Charters] came from the royal chancery and were held independent of the lord and his authority. This sort of practice, and its acceptance by landlords, brought to villeins an increasing familiarity with the apparatus of documentary culture—a knowledge of how it worked and of what documents looked like.”

³⁹ Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 484.

⁴⁰ *Monachi uero, sibi et sue domui metuentes, so non parerent uolontati comunium, omnia que petebantur que scilicet uel uillanorum firmamento uel illorum detrimento esse poterant, in forum coram omnibus protulerunt, iurantes inueniri non posse plures cartas, que uillanorum comodo cedere possint, apud eos*. Ibid., 484.

⁴¹ See e.g. *ibid.*, 456; Réville 1898, 188–189, 218, and 220; The Anonimale chronicle, 140–141 (England, 1381). *Chronique du Religieux*, vol. 1, 54; Cohn 2004, 273 (Paris, 1380). *Chronique des quatre premiers Valois*, 299 and *Chronographia regum francorum*, vol. 3, 25–26; Cohn 2004, 290 (Paris, 1382). *Chronique normande de Pierre Cochon*, 163; Cohn 2004, 292 (Rouen, 1382).

issued, the insurgents carried them together to the local market, where they were first publicly shown and then solemnly destroyed.⁴² The choice of location (the market was traditionally the geographical and social centre of urban life) shows how important the public nature of the act was to the insurgents. Beyond the mere physical destruction of documents, the visibility of the act had a symbolic value in itself: the insurgents wanted everyone to know that their former obligations and duties were null and void. Therefore, the documents' destruction became a collectively and solemnly celebrated ceremony of liberation.

From this perspective, the destruction of a document was only the final act. If we remember the example of the impaled records cited at the beginning of this article, the symbolic meaning of this action becomes clear. By impaling the documents, Ralph atte Wode took possession of these administrative objects and carried them with him to the king in London. As the insurgents protested against taxes and obligations, written records were considered material representations of the burdensome manorial system. By appropriating these documents, the insurgents demonstrated their control over them. Comparable to a flag or a banner, the impaled charter thus became a tangible symbol of the insurgents' demand to reduce taxes and to abolish bondage.⁴³ On his way to London, Ralph may have passed through Chelmsford, halfway between Peldon and the capital. Here, approximately 50 km northeast of London, the insurgents collected and burnt the juristic records of the surrounding villages.⁴⁴ Forty documents, however, were spared, impaled on long skewers and lined up at the roadside on the way to London—once more a rejection of any obligation fixed in written form and at the same time a kind of signpost to the king and the capital.⁴⁵ The single document used for this 'avenue of records' was irrelevant in itself—it was merely a material *pars pro toto* hinting at any duty or obligation fixed in written form. Thus, this symbolic use of ordinary documents is not to be underestimated.

A similar act occurred in Siena in the 14th century, although the document used was anything but arbitrary. The history of Siena—like other towns in Tuscany and Lombardy—is marked by repeated uprisings and changes in government.⁴⁶ When the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV visited Siena in 1355, the townspeople once more revolted against the city council, known as the *Nove* (council of the Nine). Charles had to take refuge in the Palazzo Pubblico, where he took over government from the

⁴² *Igitur mox obligaciones, cum quibusdam domus munimentes et rotulis quas extorserant ab archidiacono (...) in foro villae, juxta crucem, flammis consumpserunt.* Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 456. Cf. Justice 1994, 69–70.

⁴³ Justice 1994, 71, in contrast, connects the act of Ralph atte Wode to the traditional punishment for forgery, i.e. the public presentation of a forged document.

⁴⁴ Cf. Justice 1994, 150–151.

⁴⁵ *...xl brefs quels il prespont et mistroit sur haut poles en la commune chemyn.* London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/5/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 209.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bowsky 1972.

Nine and nullified all privileges which he had just granted the city—by burning the relevant charters.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the rebels stormed the palace and a church, where the lots traditionally used for allotting membership in the Council of the Nine were stored.⁴⁸ They took the box of lots and carried it into the Palazzo and, having done this, they threw them out of the window onto the square in front of the Palace. There, they tied the little cards to the tail of a donkey, shouted “death to the Nine” and chased the donkey through the city.⁴⁹ It is remarkable how purposefully the townspeople proceeded: they knew where the box was stored and seized it without hesitation. Instead of just being destroyed, the lots were elaborately desecrated as symbols of the detested Council.⁵⁰ The authority of the *Nove* was thereby visibly rejected and negated.⁵¹ The desecration of the lots thus showed that the change of regime was intended to be definite (after the revolt, the newly founded Council of the Twelve (*Dodici*) was dominated by the lower ranks of society). The revolt was not only a reckoning with the current members of the *Nove*, but with the institution itself, for which the lots served as material representations.⁵²

In summary, we can roughly differentiate three ways in which existing documents became relevant in late medieval revolts: (1) Documents and records of any sort were considered targets; whole archives were burned down with the intention of destroying any written record of the people’s duties towards their lords. (2) The insurgents demanded the surrender of particular documents, either (a) because they hoped to benefit from the privileges they contained, or (b) because they wanted to destroy specific documents they deemed disadvantageous for them. In both cases the (real or imagined) content of the document was the primary concern, although the memory of specific charters was sometimes shaped by their outer appearance. (3) Documents or records were publicly used as symbols of abstract duties or institutions. As material representations, the documents were displayed, defiled, desecrated and destroyed.

47 *E così stando lo 'nperadore in palazzo ebe la bachetta de' signori Nove e fe' rifiutare a' signori Nove e annullare ogni saramento per lui a loro fatto, e ogni cara e brivilegio lo' tolse di fatte e arse.* Cronaca senese di Donato, 577. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145. For the tradition of the destruction of documents by the authorities, see Sennis, 2013, 156–159.

48 Likewise, they stormed the exchequer, where they burnt the registers listing the culprits of former uprisings. Cronaca senese di Donato, 577–578. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145. For a case study of the election process and use of written documents in 13th-century Bergamo, cf. Blattmann 1995.

49 Cronaca senese di Donato, 578. Cf. Dartmann 2004, 144–145.

50 We may assume that the lots were destroyed during this procedure. However, simply damaging a document could affect its validity, as a Swiss example shows. In a dispute with the city of Lucerne, the inhabitants of the village of Weggis rejected any claim by Lucerne to power over their village by indicating that the municipal law of the city had holes in it and was thus invalid. Hence, the intactness of a document could indeed be of paramount importance; cf. Rauschert 2003, 163–164. Concerning the cancellation of documents, cf. Schulte 2006, 211; Adamska/Mostert 2006, 702.

51 Cf. Weber 2003, 355–356.

52 Cf. Dartmann 2004, 145–146.

The respective objects could be either (a) any sort of official record, or (b) a specific document with historic, legal, administrative or symbolic value. The prominent role documents played thus varied between being a unique object with eminent value, and being a random document used as a *pars pro toto*.

3 Demanding New Charters—and Losing them again

The credibility and reliability attributed to written documents not only becomes apparent in their deliberate destruction, but also in the insurgents' demand that their newly acquired rights and privileges be confirmed in charters.⁵³ During the Peasants' Revolt in England, the rebels did not content themselves with oral assurances from either local barons or the king concerning their newly gained material and legal privileges. Instead, they demanded that new charters be issued.⁵⁴ Menaced by the angry crowd, both the king and local landlords met these demands and ordered their clerks to deliver charters according to the insurgents' wishes.⁵⁵ Once obtained, they were again publicly shown and read by the rebels.⁵⁶

In France, the rebels even seem to have had a keen sense and knowledge of diplomatics. After the Parisian uprising of 1382, King Charles VI promised to grant the city all of their ancient rights and liberties and assured them that he would never raise taxes again. In his account of the uprising, the anonymous chronicler of the *Chronographia regum francorum* reported in detail that the king sealed the charter with yellow wax instead of the usual green. When the Parisians saw this they immediately took up arms again and angrily declared themselves prepared to fight for their rights.⁵⁷ The chronicler himself provided an explanation: green wax with waxed strings signalled a perpetual legal act, whereas yellow wax with a tail hanging down

⁵³ Cf. Blattmann 1994, esp. 335–338.

⁵⁴ ...petierunt unanimiter, cum ingenti instantia, per regis patentes literas confirmari, asserentes ipsum ab eis non recussu[ru]m, antequam ea, que peterent, confirmassent. *Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II*, 151. ...luy fesoient feare as eaux tiellez Chartes com ils vodroient mesmes deviser des plus[ieur]s Franchises & Libertez en temps a venir, p[ar] quels le dit Abbe & ses successors purront estre deseases & cinpeachez en temps a venir. *Rotuli parliamentorum*, vol. 3, 129 (no. 10). Froissart, *Chroniques*, vol. 10, 112–113; Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 432, 456, and 460. Cf. Eiden 1995, 243–244.

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 452–454, 466–468, 476–778; Knighton's *Chronicle*, 212; The *Anonimale chronicle*, 143.

⁵⁶ *Adepti cartam libertatum uille, et obligacionem praefactum, oppidani ibant gaudentes, tunc demum diuulgaturi ae crucem publice cartam quam obtinuerant de monasterio, una cum carta regia*. Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 472. *Et puis envoia la dicte bille od deux de ses chivalers a eux envers seint Kateryns et le fist leir a eux ; et cestuy qe list la bille estea en une auncien chare amont les autres, issint qe toutz purroient oier*. The *Anonimale chronicle*, 143.

⁵⁷ *Chronographia regum francorum*, vol. 3, 28.

the parchment was only used for acts with temporary and limited validity.⁵⁸ What at first sight seems to be expert knowledge of royal clerks was instead a widely-known language of materiality, depending on a fine distinction of the seal's colour and the way it was fixed to the document.

We find the same sense of materiality in southern France and in England. In the Languedoc in 1381, insurgents refused to accept a letter from the royal negotiator, because the red seal on it made them sceptical of its validity. With the help of jurists they examined the letter and indeed, instead of the expected pardon for their rebellion, the letter was only a temporary truce! As in Paris, the population of the Languedoc knew that only charters with green seals ensured indefinite validity and thus rejected the letter presented to them.⁵⁹ In the context of the English Peasants' Revolt, it has already been stated that the insurgents systematically targeted fiscal documents. The visible indicator to distinguish these from other documents was (once again) a seal of green wax.⁶⁰

These accounts suggest that the people were well acquainted with the intricacies and subtleties of diplomacy. They knew the specific colour-based coding of the chancery and thus were able to 'read' the outer appearance of charters and documents without knowing the actual content.

4 Excursus: A Revolt against all Literates?

An anonymous chronicler reported that the English rebels were not satisfied with the first draft of a charter that the king had issued to meet their demands. As in Paris in 1382, they angrily rose up once more and called on their fellow men to kill all lawyers, clerks, and generally everyone who knew how to write.⁶¹ Similar statements are noted in other chronicles. Walsingham wrote that the insurgents forced Latin teachers to swear that they would never teach grammar again so that no one would be able to renew the records destroyed during the rebellion. Therefore, "it was dangerous to be recognized as a clerk, but much more dangerous if an inkpot were found by anyone's

⁵⁸ *Tradite sunt littere, non per modum carte perpetue, cujus sigillum de cera viridi et filis cericis appendi solet, ymo erant sigillate sigillo cere crocee in cauda pergameni pendenti; in quibus continebatur quod rex cum ejus consilio et quibusdam de parentela sua, protunc remittebat impositiones fieri solitas.* (Ibid.). Cf. Pastoureaux 1996, 288–289; Challet 2008, 223, note 41.

⁵⁹ Cf. Challet 2008, 223.

⁶⁰ *Brevia de viridi cera.* London, Public Record Office, KB 145/3/6/1, cited in Eiden 1995, 208.

⁶¹ *Et quaut les comunes avoient oie la bille, ils disoient qil ne fuist forsque troefles et mokerie; et purceo retournerount a Loundres et fesoient crier parmy la citee qe toutz les gentz de la ley et toutz ceuz de la chancellerie et del eschequer et toutz qe savoient brief ou lettre escrifer, deveroient estre decolles ou ils purroient estre trovez.* The Anonimale chronicle, 143–144. Cf. Justice 1994, 49–50. See also Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 498; *Historia vitae et regni Ricardi II*, 30–31.

side, for such men never, or scarcely ever, escaped from their hands.”⁶² Was the revolt marked by anti-intellectualism and hostility to literacy?⁶³ Did the insurgents consider writing in itself an “instrument of oppression”?⁶⁴

With this episode, the chronicler first and foremost created a nightmare scenario that surely shocked every reader.⁶⁵ It can be seen as a variation of the often-alleged aim of the insurgents of killing all nobles.⁶⁶ It is of course possible that clerks were targeted and killed on purpose. A closer look at the sources, however, reveals that the main targets were not people who were merely literate, but lawyers and judges.⁶⁷ On the one hand, this can be interpreted as an expression of the growing despair of the people, who felt systematically discriminated against by local and royal courts and who now punished those responsible.⁶⁸ On the other hand, this detail might well be part of the chroniclers’ deliberate strategy to vilify the insurgents. According to Walsingham, they planned to kill all learned men in order to establish new laws.⁶⁹ This, however, is in sharp contrast to the insurgents’ appeals that traditional laws be upheld. Thus, Walsingham’s statement can be understood as a reference to the famous Sallustian phrase about rebels having a “desire for the new” (*cupiditas rerum*

⁶² *Magistros scholarum grammaticalum iurare compulerunt se nunquam paruulos instructuros in arte prefecta. Amplius quid fecerunt? Munimenta uetera studuerunt dare flammis; et ne de nouo quis reperiri ualerent qui uetera siue noua de cetero posset, uel nosset, commendare memorie, huiusmodi trucidabant. Periculosum erat agnosci pro clerico, set multo periculosius si ad latus alicuius atramentarium inuentum fuisset; nam tales uix aut nunquam ab eorum minibus euaserunt.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 496, translation 497. Cf. Justice 1994, 18 and 72. See also the so-called ‘confession’ of John Straw, one of the leaders of the revolt: Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 498.

⁶³ The chronicler Michel Pintoin noted that insurgents in southern France acted against all those whose hands were not calloused and who acted somehow sophisticated, and thus implied that the people deliberately turned against the elite, *Chronique du Religieux*, vol. 1, 308.

⁶⁴ This is the conclusion of Declercq 2013, 155–156.

⁶⁵ Cf. Justice 1994, 18.

⁶⁶ Cf. Mauntel 2012, 99.

⁶⁷ *...et omnes et singulis iuris terre peritos, tam apprenticios quam sense iustiiciarios, et cunctos iuratores patrie quos apprehendere poterant, sine ullo respect pietatis, capitis truncacione mulctare; asserentes non priusquam illis occisis, terram ingenua libertate posse gaudere.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 414; see also Knighton’s Chronicle, 216, who furthermore pointed out that personal scores were settled then as well. Cf. Harding 1984; Prescott 1984, 115.

⁶⁸ The background of this development is complex: owing to diminishing agricultural incomes, many landlords tried to tighten their grasp on their seigniorial privileges. People increasingly felt deprived of their traditional local self-government and directed their anger against lawyers and judges. Cf. Eiden 1995, 93–94, 421–422. See also the case of John of Cavendish, chief justice, who was murdered by the insurgents, *ibid.*, 299–304.

⁶⁹ E.g. the ‘confession’ of John Straw: *Cum uero nullus maior, nullus fortiori, nullus sciencior, nobis superfuisset, leges condidissemus ad placitum, quibus subiecti regulate fuissent.* Walsingham, St. Albans chronicle, 498. *...nec leges terre de cetero ualituras, eo quod iam maxima pars iuridicorum perempta fuerat, et reliqua iuxta estimacionem ipsorum fuerat perimenda, domum redirent, et strictis condicionibus experterent que uolebant.* *Ibid.*, 444.

novendarum), frequently used by medieval authors to denounce rebels and terrify readers.⁷⁰ It is unlikely that the revolt itself was directed against intellectuals or literates. On the contrary, literates were quite useful for the insurgents. As we saw in Bury St. Edmunds, the townspeople consulted educated men to check and verify the newly issued charters.⁷¹ Furthermore, only archives were deliberately destroyed, whereas libraries and church registers were spared.⁷²

5 Repression: Issuing New Charters, Destroying Former Ones

Even though the insurgents frequently succeeded in ensuring that new charters were issued according to their demands, the quarrel over the documents did not end. Once Richard II, King of England, regained control of London in July 1381, he issued a new charter, revoking all of the liberties the rebels had forced him to grant, and stating (according to Walsingham) that all privileges awarded during the rebellion were to be returned.⁷³ In some places people refused to be the first to return any charter as a “dangerous precedent” and a “dishonourable act”⁷⁴. Faced with the royal army, however, this resistance soon collapsed. The chronicler Jean Froissart vividly depicted how the ‘natural order’ was symbolically restored. After the rebellion, the king travelled through his land. In a village in Kent, he and his officials executed the alleged instigators of the local revolt and then demanded the handover of the rebels’ charters: “In the presence of the people, the king’s men ripped them up and threw them in a ditch.”⁷⁵ The recently issued charter was thus publicly destroyed, as a symbol that the

⁷⁰ Sallustius, *De coniuratione*, §28, 37, and 48. The phrase was literally used by Michel Pintoin to describe the intentions of the Parisian rebels of 1380, *Chronique du Religieux*, vol. 1, p. 22; cf. Ribémont 2010.

⁷¹ See above and van Leeuwen 2008, 307 (concerning Bruges in 1477).

⁷² Justice 1994, 45–46.

⁷³ *Rotuli parliamentorum*, vol. 3, 100; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls*, vol. 2, 27; *Statutes of the realm*, vol. 2, 20; Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 520–522. Cf. Eiden 1995, 388–395; Hinck 2008. In 1383, after a series of uprisings in Flanders, count Philip the Bold also forced the Flemish towns to send all their charters and privileges to Lille, where they were thoroughly revised, cf. van Leeuwen 2008, 311.

⁷⁴ *Nunquam de cetero est offerenda pecunia, nunquam carte reddende. Et si reddende carte forent, quare nos primi meticulose in perniciosum exemplum inciperemus? Non contingat hoc dedecus in persona nostra (...)* Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 536.

⁷⁵ *Et furent les lettres demandées que on leur avoit données et acordées; elles furent là aportées et rendues as gens dou roi, liquel, en la presence de tout le peuple, les deschirèrent et jettèrent en val.* Froissart, *Chroniques*, vol. 10, 131. Froissart reported the same procedure for London: *Encore leur fu commandé de par le roi et sus le teste que, qui avoit lettre dou roi empetrée, il le remesist avant. Li aucun, et ne mies tout, les aportèrent. Li rois les faisoit prendre e deschirer en leur presence.* Ibid., 123.

king had cancelled all concessions and privileges. The charter served as the visible and tangible representation of everything the revolt was about, and its destruction thus marked the end of the rebellion—and its failure. This public performance of the king's triumph must undoubtedly have been a humiliation for the people. In another scene, Walsingham reports the king's pithy words to the insurgents' petitioners: "You have been peasants and peasants you will continue to be; you will remain in bondage, not as before, but in incomparably worse conditions."⁷⁶

The same public and symbolic (and non-violent) form of repression was used in Flanders. In 1469, as punishment for the fact that his 'joyous entry' into Ghent two years earlier had been disturbed, Charles the Bold, count of Burgundy and Flanders, forced the townspeople to hand over an ancient charter issued by King Philip IV in 1301, confirming the privilege of urban self-government. After a symbolic submission of the magistrates, the charter was read aloud and then cut with a knife, as reported in several sources.⁷⁷ The charter, however, was not entirely destroyed, but survived in Flemish and French archives until the present day.⁷⁸ The parchment has three angled cuts in the centre, so the charter was probably folded before cutting.⁷⁹ Another copy of the cancelled charter survived in Ghent, cut diagonally.⁸⁰ Marc Boone suggested that the count gave this copy to Ghent as an object of commemoration (*lieu de mémoire*), whereas Georges Declercq argued (by comparing the methods of cutting) that the charter from Ghent was nullified no earlier than the 16th century.⁸¹ Either way, it is remarkable that the cancelled and damaged charter was not destroyed, but preserved in an archive. It was included and precisely described in an archive inventory from Lille in 1471.⁸² The damaged charter now served as a constant reminder and as a legal proof for the cancellation of the privilege and thereby of the count's triumph over the city.

⁷⁶ *Rustici quidem fuistis et estis; in bondagio permanebitis, non ut hactenus, set incomparabiliter uiliori.* Walsingham, *St. Albans chronicle*, 514, translation 515.

⁷⁷ *...fit convenir Gantois à compte et à genoux devant lui, atout leurs privilèges; et en présence d'eux les coupa et déchira à son plaisir; ce qui est de perpétuel record, et non oncque veue la pareille.* Chastellain, *Oeuvres*, vol. 5, 505. Cf. Paravicini 2001, 323. See also an official report: *Dont mondit seigneur respondi incontinent que on adnulleroit du tout ledit privilege. Et ce oyant, mons[aigneu]r Jehan Le Groz, premier secretaire et audencier, prinst ung canyvet ou tailgeplume, et cassa ledit privilege, present tous assistens.* Collection de documents inédits concernant l'histoire de la Belgique, vol. 1, 208 (No. 32, 15.01.1469), cited in Declercq 2013, 157–158. See also Philippe de Commynes, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 113 (II, 4). For the charter cf. Boone 2003, esp. 24. For the uprising, cf. Arnade 1991.

⁷⁸ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Coll. mélanges Colbert 347, no. 59. Cf. Boone 2003, 26–28, 41–43, reproduction: 40 and Mauntel et al., 2015, 743.

⁷⁹ This was the usual method of cancellation in the Burgundian chancery, cf. Nelis 1927, 771–772.

⁸⁰ Ghent, State Archives in Belgium, Series 94, no. 233. Cf. Boone 2003, 33 and 43–45.

⁸¹ Boone 2003, 33; Declercq 2013, 158, note 135. Cf. Nelis 1927, 768–775.

⁸² Lille, Archives départementales du Nord, B 114, fol. 273^r, cited in Boone 2003, 27, note 82.

6 Conclusion

Finally, we have come full circle. Both the insurgents and the government mirrored each other by publicly destroying unpopular documents. One might assume that the rebels deliberately imitated those practices of public display and destruction they knew from witnessing official ceremonies. The public destruction of documents was widely used both as a symbolic rejection of legal claims and as a legal annulment of privileges.⁸³

It is striking to note how similarly different social groups in medieval society used symbolic acts involving written documents to communicate demands, claims and triumphs. Documents were not considered to be merely functional objects. Both insurgents and the nobility considered them to be symbolically charged and thus integrated them into eye-catching forms of political action. These actions repeatedly involved the (violent) seizure and public display of documents, as well as their demonstrative defilement and destruction.

To conclude, I would like to bring my results together in three steps.

1. On literacy: With regard to the sources, the question of whether the insurgents were literate or not seems to miss the point. In fact, the majority of the population may not have been literate in a modern sense. Still they were, on the one hand, surely able to recognize key words or to interpret the outer appearance of a document (display type, colour of seal, etc.) and thus fit into what Steven Justice called ‘insurgent literacy’.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the sources describe how the people had specific charters checked and interpreted with the aid of specialists, such as clerks and lawyers. Thus, in the late Middle Ages, a lack of literacy might indeed appear as a shortcoming, but could easily be compensated for. Hence, literacy in this sense does not only mean the ability to read and write, but also to interpret the materiality of an object.
2. On materiality: During revolts, written documents were broadly considered to be material manifestations of the existing legal order or of law itself.⁸⁵ According to this function, insurgents took possession of documents and records, showed them publicly, defiled them symbolically and ultimately destroyed them. The actual legal content was transcended and the document became a representation of what the protest was directed against. On a more practical level, the outer appearance of a document was understood as a link to its content and value: the display script or the seal’s colour were indeed legally relevant characteristics of a charter and thus affected its meaning. People were well acquainted with some

⁸³ For a brief overview cf. Declercq 2013, 152–161. More examples can be found in Weber 2003.

⁸⁴ Justice 1994, 13–66. Clanchy 1993, 328–334, called this “practical literacy”. Cf. Challet 2008, 223.

⁸⁵ Cf. Mente 2004, 430–431.

aspects of alleged experts' knowledge on charters and diplomatics, and chose their targets accordingly, or likewise rejected inadequately issued charters. Apart from that, however, the primary aim and effect of the destruction of documents was to nullify their (legal) content.

3. On communication: The lack of widespread literacy was compensated for by public performances, where documents were shown, defiled or issued. When issued, the validity of a charter depended on such forms of confirmation. When defiled, the public desecration made the denial of its legal content and symbolic value widely known. It is remarkable that the authorities, as well as the insurgents used the same mechanism of communication for these purposes. Thus, large parts of society spoke and understood the same 'language of action', strongly relying on visibility, symbolism, and materiality. Documents could easily be symbolically charged and desecrated again by the same mechanisms, based on the widespread trust in the efficiency and reliability of written documents.

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Rebecca Sauer

The Textile Performance of the Written Word: Islamic Robes of Honour (*khilaʿ*)*

1 Introduction

When Ḥasanak, the vizier at the court of the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd (d. 1030), returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1023, he received a “robe of honour” from the Fatimid Caliph al-Ẓāhir (r. 1021–1036). Given the political circumstances at that time, this symbolic act was regarded as highly controversial. The Shiite Fatimid Caliphs were regarded as usurpers by the Abbasids, their Sunni counterparts in Baghdad. The Baghdadi Caliph al-Qādir bi-llāh (r. 991–1031), as the formal suzerain of the Ghaznavid Sultan, was offended by the robes Ḥasanak received from his Cairene adversary, and therefore denounced Ḥasanak as a traitor and extremist and demanded his execution. However, Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna appeased the Caliph by sending the robes to Baghdad, where they were publicly burnt.¹ How did the Abbasid Caliph come to see the robes as such a provocation? Was it simply the monetary value ascribed to textiles in the pre-modern Middle East? Or was it rather a quality of the clothing—namely, the fact that these robes bore inscriptions of the powerful gift-givers’ names?

As we see here, textiles can be combined with acts of giving, these acts being usually publicly performed. This is not a phenomenon alien to other cultures and contexts: Beyond the Islamic context, textiles “help(s) reproduce social groups to reproduce themselves” and entail “almost limitless potential for communication”² due to their logistic and stylistic flexibility. According to Marshall McLuhan, clothing is one of the “extensions of man”, representing an amplification of human skin.³ Clothing as seen within this framework can therefore be a powerful means of communication in any given society. Textiles are usually embedded in complex patterns of social strategies that can function regardless of questions of literacy or illiteracy. Robing as a cultural and vestimentary code is understood by most people regardless of their ability to read. However, when it comes to inscribed textiles in the Islamic

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1 Hambly 2001, 201; Sanders 2001, 228–229; cf. Enderwitz et al. 2015.

2 Schneider/Weiner 1989, 1.

3 McLuhan 2001, 129–132.

context, the perspective is slightly altered as the producers/original owners of the pieces inscribe themselves symbolically into the artefacts in question.

The focus of the present article is thus communication through inscribed textiles that are given and worn in public. In the Islamic context, such textiles are usually subsumed under the Arabic term *khil'a* (pl. *khila'*), so-called “robes of honour”. The term *tashrif* (pl. *tashārif*) is also used, the Arabic root *sh-r-f* signifying the “honouring” of a given robe’s recipient.⁴ In medieval Islamic times, these robes were given to notables, state functionaries, or foreign guests, bearing the inscribed name of the giver, usually a Caliph or Sultan. These textile-related practices are regarded here as set between practices of investiture⁵ as well as those of giving and visualizing. In medieval Islamic contexts, the three aspects are usually not seen as intertwined. Scholars mostly argued that gifts were not an important economic factor within Islamic societies and therefore not equivalent to the Maussian *potlatch* institution. However, these insights notwithstanding, I argue that the very act of giving is essential to understand public representations of social relations in the medieval Islamic context; the notion of gift exchange, as seen especially by Maurice Godelier, is a suitable approach to the Islamic institution of *khil'a*. His focus on the act of keeping a gift is broadened here by the aspects of visibility and performance that are essential characteristics of the *khil'a* phenomenon.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on textiles and their functions in Middle Eastern pre-Islamic and Islamic societies; afterwards I will briefly shed light on gift exchange in the medieval Islamic context. Chapter 5 elucidates aspects of visibility and performance that are crucial to the communicative potential of robing practices.

2 Socio-economic and Ceremonial Aspects of Clothing

According to Yedida K. Stillman, “[...] the entire Islamic vestimentary system [a term borrowed from Roland Barthes, ann. RS] is [...] a synthesis of pre-Islamic Arab, Hellenistic, Mediterranean, and Irano-Turkic modes of dress.”⁶ Textile production was a major economic branch in the Muslim Middle East during the Middle Ages.⁷ On the early Islamic Arabian Peninsula, garments were considered a “currency”, paid in the

⁴ Diem 2002, 38–39.

⁵ To a certain extent the phenomenon of *khil'a* is comparable to medieval European investiture. Yet in the Islamic context, the practice of bestowing a fine garment upon a certain person goes far beyond the boundaries of inaugurational situations. Thus, donating and visualizing are added to the framework.

⁶ Stillman 2000, 16.

⁷ Stillman 2000, 49.

form of taxes (*zakāt*) or shared as booty, continuing “the custom of oriental rulers since ancient times”.⁸

Textile production had its apogee under the Fatimid Caliphs (ca. 909–1171). During the reign of al-Mu‘izz (d. 975) and his successors, the manufacture of luxurious robes and fabrics was institutionalized by the founding of *dār al-kiswa* (ministry of the *kiswa*⁹) and the *dār al-ṭirāz* (ministry of *ṭirāz*). From the 11th century onwards, central Asian materials became increasingly important due to cultural contacts with the Mongolian state and the influx of Mamluk mercenary soldiers.¹⁰

The textile industry did not exclusively supply courtly customers with precious materials, but was firmly connected to pre-modern Islamic economies in general. In the pre-modern Mediterranean and especially in the Middle East, dress and furnishing fabrics were a more or less inflation-proof currency. Usually, it was not merely an amount of money that featured in trousseau lists, divorce settlements, or wills, but rather some type of woven fabric (*qumāsh* in Arabic), as the Cairo Geniza documents, for example, clearly indicate: clothing was part of a family’s investment, more easily convertible into cash than real estate.¹¹ S.D. Goitein even compared the textile industry’s position “to the place of steel and other metals in [the] modern economy”.¹² The price level for fabrics was 5–30 dinars for fine garments in 9th-century Iraq (cf. the monthly wage of a labourer: 0,5–1,5 dinars).¹³

The textile business would continue to be an important economic factor in medieval Islam for centuries. Even in the early modern 18th century, when Cairo had lost most of its former commercial influence, one fifth of its craftsmen were involved in textile manufacture and one quarter of the total number of commercial transactions were connected to selling or buying fabrics. Apart from the famous Central Asian silk routes, there were several other trading routes: along the Persian coastlands, commodities from the East found their way to Iraq, or alternatively to Southern Arabia and from there up the Red Sea.¹⁴

Apart from being a global commodity, textiles functioned as markers of social hierarchies and as important media for political or religious messages in regional and international circumstances—as objects in connection with investitures and as suitable diplomatic gifts, but also understood, in certain contexts, as bearing religious blessing (*baraka*) for the owner (see below). One example of the centrality of textiles was—and still is—the *kiswa*, the inscribed black cover of the Holy *Ka’ba* in Mecca. To be accepted by the Meccan authorities as a donor of the *kiswa* meant a

⁸ Stillman 2000, 26.

⁹ See below.

¹⁰ Stillman 2000, 62–63; Allsen 1997, 27–45, 71–98.

¹¹ Stillman 2000, 49–50; Stillman 1997; Baker 1995, 15.

¹² Quoted according to Stillman 2000, 49.

¹³ Stillman 2000, 49.

¹⁴ Baker 1995, 14; see also Allsen 1997, 99–101.

political advantage over potential contenders. Since the 15th century, the *kiswa*, which is renewed each year, has come from Egyptian workshops.¹⁵

As for the symbolic function of textiles as markers of social stratification, the Abbasid court protocol may be useful as an illustration. According to Hilāl al-Šābi' (d. 1056), the Caliphs usually wore red boots. In addition to this the author states:

As to Abbasids of rank—their attire is the black tunic (*qabā'*) of family members [...]. They are differentiated by the kind of military belt and sword that they wear and in the way that they are worn. However, those among them who have been appointed to judgeships may wear the *ṭaylasān* [a kind of headshawl worn over the turban, RS]. [...] Descendants of the Anṣār [Medinan supporters of the prophet Muḥammad, RS] should wear yellow garments and turbans. As for the military commanders and officers—their attire is every sort of black *qabā'* and turbans as have been described. Their footwear consists of black stockings (*jawārib*) and *lālakāt* (a type of shoe) tied with straps (*zanānīr*). These are the rules that had to be observed. Those of lower rank are prohibited from wearing black, but are free to choose other colors, so long as they do not abandon all restraint, indulge in vulgarity, and forget the primary rules of etiquette.¹⁶

Under the Fatimids, and the Seljuqs and Mamluks as well, clothing styles and colours were strong indicators of social relationships—functions and stratification were made visible in textiles.¹⁷ Especially under the Mamluks, the military caste strove for distinction by attire; favoured markers included enormous headgear, specific shirts and belts, as well as colours designated to indicate military affiliation, such as yellow.¹⁸ During these periods, power relations were further strongly visualized through various court ceremonies including the giving of robes (see below).¹⁹

This communicative aspect of fabrics was not only manifest through clothing; furnishings, tent walls, and the “royal” saddlecloth were important textiles of everyday courtly life.²⁰ According to historian of Islamic Art Lisa Golombek, there was a strong “textile mentality” at work in the “draped Universe of Islam”.²¹

¹⁵ Wensinck/Jomier 2014.

¹⁶ Quoted according to Stillman 2000, 48.

¹⁷ See Fuess 2011.

¹⁸ Fuess 2008; al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 39–43.

¹⁹ Stowasser 1984.

²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn 2012, 252–3.

²¹ Golombek 1988. She argues that developments in Islamic architecture can only be understood with reference to textile aesthetics, Koran manuscripts, for example, being comparable to decorative details in carpets.

3 *ṭirāz*, *khil'a* and *tashrif*

Three concepts are crucial in order to understand pre-modern Islamic textile-related gifting practices: *ṭirāz*, *khil'a* and *tashrif*. *Ṭirāz* is a term originally from Persian (literally meaning *embroidery*), designating inscribed bands on textiles, in Islamic societies predominantly embroidered onto or woven into fabric.²² It eventually indicated a strip of writing embroidered on papyrus. Later on, the term was also used to describe the workshops in which those textiles were manufactured, and became synonymous with the term *khil'a*.²³ The root *kh-l'* is semantically related to the root *l-b-s*, which roughly means “to wear”; *khala'a* denotes “to undress” as well as “to bestow a robe upon somebody”. In a broader sense, both roots are thus applied for practices of investiture.²⁴ Another term often synonymous with *khil'a* and *ṭirāz* in the medieval sources is the term *tashrif*, which means the “honouring” of a person with gifts (see above). For the sake of terminological clarity, however, we will apply the three terms to distinct (yet interwoven) phenomena: the *khil'a* is the attire-gift. As far as the sources indicate, the term was applied for a whole set of textile gifts—often a combination of a mantle and several accessories and/or valuable horses,²⁵ sometimes only a small hat.²⁶ The term *ṭirāz*, in this article, in turn designates an inscribed (but not necessarily embroidered) textile band, and the *tashrif* refers to the practice of honouring a person by bestowing a *khil'a* upon him/her. *Tashrif* was usually performed in public, as the sources indicate: the bestowal of robes was part of royal audiences as well as of official processions, and therefore visible to the general public.²⁷

According to Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), there were three main and important royal prerogatives of the Caliphs; all of these practices were related to the appearance of the royal name in sense-perceptible form, thus publicly communicated: being named in the Friday prayer (*khuṭba*), the royal Mint (*sikka*, *ḍarb*), and *ṭirāz*, i.e. having one's name embroidered on or woven into precious fabric.²⁸ This *ṭirāz* institution was under state control for many centuries, and when in later Mamluk times the (state-run) economy “declined”, *ṭirāz* continued to flourish beyond the state sector.²⁹

²² Stillman 2014.

²³ Stillmann 2000, 120–121; Stillman/Sanders 2014; see also Diem 2002 and Springberg-Hinsen 2000, 21–24.

²⁴ Mayer 1952, 60.

²⁵ Diem 2002, 38–39.

²⁶ Mayer 1952, 56–58. It is difficult to assess the range of the term, as mostly fragments have survived down to the present day, and we have to rely on metatexts to understand the whole phenomenon. One example of a complete attire is the “Veil of St. Anne”.

²⁷ Mayer 1952, 61; Petry 2001; Stowasser 1984.

²⁸ Stillman 2000, 131. She even goes so far as to state that “Omission of the ruler's name from any or all of these was tantamount to rebellion” (126). See also Ibn Khaldūn 2012, 244–252.

²⁹ See below note 46.

The origins of the royal manufacture of precious textiles are Sasanian as well as Byzantine, as the production of certain luxury products was the prerogative of the rulers in these societies.³⁰ Well before the 6th century AD, honorific robing was a common practice in courtly life in Constantinople. Robes were exchanged and given for church investitures, bureaucratic promotions, diplomatic missions, and to honour outstanding individuals. In 481, for example, Clovis, the first Frankish king to be baptized, received a robe from the Byzantine Emperor; candidates for commercial guilds were given robes as part of the induction into their specific offices.³¹ In the Sasanian Empire, bureaucrats also received visual signs upon inauguration—the most prominent of these signs were diadems and other headgear.³²

Ceremonial robing was therefore a common cultural practice before the coming of Islam—and it is plausible that the very first Muslims were familiar with it. Robing appears several times in the Koran, in Q 18:31, 22:23 and 76:12, e.g., where “clothing of fine garments” is clearly associated with rewards for good deeds in the afterlife:

[18:31] Those, theirs shall be Gardens of Eden, underneath which rivers flow; therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold, and they shall be robed in green garments of silk and brocade, therein reclining upon couches. O, how excellent a reward! And O, how fair a resting-place!³³

The prophet Muḥammad purportedly bestowed *khilaʿ* upon highly respected members of the emerging Muslim community. He is said to have given his own mantle (*burda*) to the poet Kaʿb b. Zuhayr. Later on, this would become a precedent for the *tashrif* practice, as well as for the transmission of the *khirqā* (woollen robe) from master to pupil/successor in Sufi contexts.³⁴

The Prophet’s mantle was at times hotly contested by different traditions. According to the Shiite branch of Islam, Muḥammad willed the *burda* to his son-in-law, ‘Alī. The Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad used the object as a symbol of dynastic legitimacy as well.³⁵ Under the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775), for example, the practice of donning woollen cloaks representing the supposed Prophet’s *burda* during certain ceremonies was instituted. Not surprisingly, it was under this dynasty that the bestowal of *khilaʿ* was firmly established as courtly protocol. The secretary class (*kuttāb*), often of Iranian background, was of major importance for the setting of cultural trends, such as certain behavioural codes, the consumption of specific goods and of literary tastes, genres and motifs. The Cairo-centered Fatimid adversaries of the Abbasid caliphate in turn used the public space to display their Ismaili ideology,

³⁰ Stillman 2000, 122–123.

³¹ Gordon 2001, 9–12.

³² Rose 2001.

³³ Translated by Arberry 1955.

³⁴ Stillman 2000, 26; for the *khirqā*, see Michon 2014; Elias 2001.

³⁵ Stillman 2000, 17.

thereby fostering a more luxurious and uniform style of clothing.³⁶ Official robes of honour “were produced with his [the Caliph’s, ann. RS] imprimatur so-to-speak and came to be considered by extension as bearing his charismatic blessedness as well.”³⁷

The first fabrics with writing on them (*ṭirāz*) in the Islamic era were produced during the Umayyad period (661–750). The first Caliph to whom the establishment of a state-run *ṭirāz* workshop is ascribed was Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 724–743). The *tashrif* practice is also said to have continued under the later Umayyads, including the giving of embroidered garments.³⁸ Despite the silence of the metatexts on the issue of early inscribed *khila'*, several artefacts have been found that can be dated to this era. The oldest pieces to survive are two fragments inscribed with the name of the late Umayyad Caliph al-Marwān (II., r. 744–750), and containing information as to their place of production.³⁹ During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Hārūn al-Rashid (r. 786–809), however, the bestowal of inscribed robes of honour had become a firm part of courtly life and protocol. Under the Fatimids this tendency broadened.⁴⁰ Under the Mamluks it became more or less inflationary; the bestowal of robes had become an almost daily routine.⁴¹

With regard to the Ayyubid (ca. 1171–1250) and Mamluk (ca. 1250–1517) eras, it has been argued that there was a decline in the *khila'*/*ṭirāz* institution due to the declining quality of the materials. This seems to be too harsh a judgment. *Ṭirāz* were no longer manufactured in state-run workshops, but produced in factories run by “private entrepreneurs”. Quoting Ibn Khaldūn, Stillman states that the *tashrif* practice was still widespread during Mamluk times and even later.⁴² However:

[...] the *ṭirāz* bands that had been the most distinctive hallmark of *khila'* under the great caliphates and the Turkish military regimes that ruled the Arab world throughout most of the Middle Ages were no longer the fashion [in the Ottoman, Safavid and Qajar eras, ann. RS].⁴³

When we talk of luxurious objects we sometimes forget that textile-related practices went beyond courtly contexts. The Geniza records, especially trousseau lists, are witness to the overall social role of fabrics up to the early Mamluk period.⁴⁴ It is especially remarkable that the “bourgeoisie” tried to imitate the textile practices of the elites: “Merchants, for example, bestowed *khila'* and *ṭirāz* garments upon relatives

³⁶ Stillman 2000, 41–43, 53–55; for the “Fatimid public text” see also Bierman 1998, 60–99.

³⁷ Stillman 2000, 129. Cf. Sanders 2001.

³⁸ Stillman 2000, 40.

³⁹ Blair 1997, 97.

⁴⁰ Bierman 1998.

⁴¹ Fuess 2012; Petry 2001.

⁴² Stillman 2000, 132, 133–137; see Walker 2000 and Mackie 1984 for details.

⁴³ Stillman 2000, 137.

⁴⁴ Stillman 2000, 55–61.

and friends. In a contract of betrothal (*sheṭar ērūsīn*), the groom-to-be promises to give his bride a robe of honor on their wedding night. In a letter written while on a business trip to India, a merchant orders as a gift for his beloved son a *ṭirāz* turban of fine [...] linen with the young man's name embroidered on it."⁴⁵ There were even workshops that created "fake *ṭirāz* with pseudo-inscriptions", which looked like inscriptions but were merely "decorative bands".⁴⁶

4 The Significance of the Gift

When talking of gift-giving practices, I rely on the framework developed by Godelier in his *The Enigma of the Gift*. Godelier argues that the threefold process of giving, receiving/accepting, and returning a gift as outlined by Mauss has to be supplemented by the aspect of keeping a gift.⁴⁷ Receiving a robe during a public ceremony is a standard procedure in the pre-modern Middle Eastern context. However, concerning Mauss's threefold scenario (giving, receiving/accepting, returning a gift), certain questions have to be asked: does receiving a gift really imply that it has to be reciprocated in some form or another, the reciprocal gift being "equivalent" in value to the original gift? In the context of *khil'a*, there seems to be a certain expectation from the giver as to the future behaviour of the receiver, namely, loyalty and the fostering of social relationships. The immaterial, in this context, the sustainability of power-relations, seems to be corroborated by the material. Godelier argues:

[...] It is first and foremost the different ways humans imagine their relationships with each other and with what we call nature that distinguish societies and the periods during which some of them exist. But the imaginary cannot transform itself into the social, it cannot manufacture 'society' by existing on a purely 'mental' level. It must be 'materialized' in concrete relations which take on their form and content in institutions, and of course in the *symbols* which represent them and cause them to send messages back and forth, to communicate. When the imaginary is 'materialized' in social relationships, it becomes a part of social reality [emphasis by Godelier].⁴⁸

This last point must not be underemphasized: the imaginary has to be *materialized* and furthermore *visualized* in some form in order to be intelligible for different actors in a given society. By the same token, social relationships become subject to a network of societal surveillance—a strategy also found in other contexts: in order to prevent the misuse of pious donations (*waqf*), *waqf* deeds were usually either read aloud in

⁴⁵ Stillman 2000, 55–56.

⁴⁶ Gervers 1978–79.

⁴⁷ Godelier 1999, 8.

⁴⁸ Godelier 1999, 27.

public or inscribed in stone on the facilities concerned.⁴⁹ Thus, in addition to verbal communication (textiles inscribed with the name of the ruler/giver in the former case and a foundation text in the latter), non-verbal communication creates a network of obligations and counter-obligations that is underlined by tangible objects.

As mentioned above, the suitability of gift exchange theories for the Islamic context is doubted by several scholars. Stewart Gordon, for example, argues:

One might be tempted to use 'gift-exchange' theory to analyse the *khil'at* ceremony. Certainly, *khil'at* embodies the central insights of Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*: that every gift comes with obligations, that gift and obligation form part of a unified system, and that this gifting system affects many other aspects of culture. Nevertheless, the structure and dynamics of Mauss's theory cannot be applied to the *khil'at* ceremony. [...] *Khil'at* was not the central organizing principle of the societies that used it.⁵⁰

I, however, argue that even without being a "central organizing principle", *tashrif* practices were crucial for sustaining the social fabric—especially in fragmented societies such as the Mamluk state. Considering these insights, Linda Komaroff admits a suitable gift exchange framework for the Islamic context was yet to be written.⁵¹ According to Komaroff, textile-related gift giving practices entail characteristic features. Thus, "their presentation [...] was part of the message, and the procession and even display of gifts, along with the presentation and the wearing of counter-gifts such as the robes of honor, were all a form of communication, sometimes quite public."⁵² Giving used to be "performed"—extraordinary packaging was part of the play.⁵³ Gifts were part of complex patterns of social life and could serve a variety of functions:

[...] gift giving was an integral part of the social fabric, especially as a means of formalizing alliances, as a signifier of power and expression of political aspirations, or as an instrument to obtain salvation. [...] Gift giving intended to further princely ambitions or diplomatic goals, to seal peace treaties, to promote devotion, or to reward loyalty was integral to maintaining a vast network of personal, social, political, economic, and religious relationships, and rare, costly, and aesthetically pleasing objects were at its core.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Compare Mottahedeh/Stilt 2003; see also Stilt 2011.

⁵⁰ Gordon 2003, 25–26, n. 10.

⁵¹ Komaroff 2011, 20.

⁵² Komaroff 2011, 20.

⁵³ Komaroff 2011, 20.

⁵⁴ Komaroff 2011, 20–21. However, she is aware of the fact that the majority of those gifts that survived to be analyzed by modern art historians belong predominantly to a phenomenon of elite material culture. This reminds us of a basic research problem: by focusing on objects that were made of valuable materials and featured prominently in courtly environments, we risk excluding other functions and types of gift exchange—e.g., gift exchange based on the giving of less valuable but nevertheless highly "emotionally" relevant objects, such as the *mandil* (handkerchief) or other seemingly ubiquitous and "profane" things. See Rosenthal 1971; Enderwitz 1995, 60.

Anthony Cutler, contrary to most scholars discussing gift exchange, argues that in Byzantine and Islamic contexts the gifts were to be regarded as part of economic history. Cutler elucidates the supposed dynamics of symbolic and economic capital by referring to the role and function of garments exchanged: the price of silk was “effectively equivalent” to gold; garments were part of tax payment in Arabia, and *khilaʿ* were part of the salaries granted to government officials (see above).⁵⁵ The sources support this latter point. The 15th-century author al-Qalqashandī (d. 1419) elaborates on the *tashrif* practice in his chapter on gifts/donations (*al-inʿām*) to the notables, a chapter that also contains a paragraph on the bestowal of horses and pious foundations.⁵⁶ Thus, gift giving practices do not seem to have been interpreted solely in light of mere courtesy and good manners—moreover, they were regarded as part of the royal provision of notables. The precious objects in turn were usually on public display.⁵⁷

5 Visibility, Legibility and Performance of Textiles

One important feature was named in the previous chapter: gift exchange has to be visible in order to effectively publicize social relationships. As we have learned, the aforementioned *ṭirāz* is an inscription, originally embroidered on a piece of textile, be it cotton, wool, or silk. The writing surface is thus portable—however, this does not imply that the script is as easily detectable as the writing on the walls of mosques in Fatimid Cairo,⁵⁸ for example. The writing usually appears on bands around the sleeves of a robe, vertically on the chest and occasionally on the back, as on the famous “Veil of St. Anne”.⁵⁹ The writing styles applied do not guarantee the absolute legibility of the script; however, the repertoire of content in *ṭirāz* textiles tended to be limited: names of rulers, names of administrators, and blessings were popular motifs.⁶⁰ So even extravagant decoration that might have complicated the semantic comprehension of *khilaʿ* inscriptions was not necessarily an obstacle to actually grasping the message. Besides, the public presentation of robes shows that the iconicity of the script superseded its semanticity, and given the very public nature of robe bestowal and use, it is highly likely that the message was understood without the text. It was therefore a useful tool for communicating in a semi-literate society.

The visibility of garments has not always been important to Islamic rulers, as examples from the Umayyad period, where the wearing of luxury garments in public

⁵⁵ Cutler 2001.

⁵⁶ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52–55.

⁵⁷ See Cutler 2008, 91–93 for the role of the „object on display“, i.e. their “signifying role”.

⁵⁸ Bierman 1998, 75–95.

⁵⁹ Elsberg/Guest 1936.

⁶⁰ Blair 1997.

was not common, have shown.⁶¹ In later times, such textile practices were instead performed quite publicly. At the Abbasid court, as well as under the Fatimids⁶² and Mamluks,⁶³ robes were given in ceremonial contexts and were often worn during processions. According to the above-mentioned Hilāl al-Šābi', in 983 the Buyid governor 'Aḍū al-Dawla (r. 949–983) was granted a robe by the Caliph al-Ṭā'i' (d. 991) after a proper ceremony: he was ordered to kiss the floor in the caliphal audience hall when approaching the ruler, a practice he had to repeat facing several Baghdadi notables to complete the ceremony.⁶⁴

For the later Mamluk era, according to the 15th-century author al-Qalqashandī, there were specific occasions when robes of honour were given to members of Mamluk society: religious and secular holidays were most prominent among them, and the robing was usually performed in public.⁶⁵ A typical *tashrīf* ceremony in the Mamluk period involved the display of the textiles in the central courtyard of the Cairo citadel. Afterwards, the recipients paraded down from the citadel hill to a central square in the city.⁶⁶ Festival processions were also popular occasions for the bestowal of robes.⁶⁷ It was a publicly visible ritual—a way to convey power relations and display influential social networks. Robing was by no means the only form of donation and power display in the Mamluk era; besides giving horses and valuable objects other than textiles to specific persons, the endowment (*waqf*) and support of pious institutions was a widespread phenomenon.⁶⁸

The performance and therefore communicative potential of the text was by that time obvious for authors writing on the significance of the written word. According to al-Qalqashandī's secretarial manual *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā*, inscriptions on fabrics and buildings are ubiquitous and understood even by the illiterate, even outside the capital city of Cairo. They are a means to "remind them [...] of the justice (*'adl*) in this state".⁶⁹ Thus, even though the written word may not be semantically intelligible to the "common people", the "presence" of writing in official contexts reminds them of the societal order. In the much narrower and original textile sense, *ṭirāz* bands prominently feature on the robes given to the notables of the kingdom. Al-Qalqashan-

⁶¹ Stillman 2000, 42–43: "[...] for the Umayyads, the wearing of luxury garments and Iranian fashions were primarily a private indulgence, and not for display beyond the confines of their desert palaces, since they had cultivated the public image of the oldtime Arab desert sayyid. The Abbasids, on the other hand, made public use of special clothing."

⁶² Bierman 1998, 95–99; Sanders 2001.

⁶³ Petry 2001.

⁶⁴ Sourdel 2001.

⁶⁵ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 39–43, 52–55.

⁶⁶ Petry 2001, 355; see also Stowasser 1984.

⁶⁷ Petry 2001, 364–365.

⁶⁸ See Komaroff 2011.

⁶⁹ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IX, 252.

dī thus informs us that “the honorific names (*alqāb*) of the Sultan are inscribed on these textiles.”⁷⁰ He mentions the Mamluk robing practices in a paragraph on “the outer shapes of the elite” of his native Egypt. The same chapter contains information on the feuds (*iqṭā‘āt*) that were essential to the income policies affecting the realm’s military elite. Thus, the overall theme of this chapter is mostly, but not exclusively, fashion as a means to indicate hierarchies within a society. Moreover, this frame of reference sheds light on how the author might have understood social bonds among the diverse parts of Mamluk society in his day. According to this survey, the community functions on the exchange of goods, presents, valuable objects, and appointments to government and military posts. The regime is generous to those who are supposed to be loyal. In addition to the act of donating, those in power publicly display the names of the recipients, so that a kind of mutual dependence forms the glue of Mamluk society—at least as outlined by sources contemporary with al-Qalqashandī. I would rather underline the very strong sense for the ceremonial and the visibility of donating, as that seems to feature prominently in the sources. However, the visibility of the ceremonial act is expressed by material culture. There is, al-Qalqashandī argues, a clear meritocratic principle at work when it comes to the specific material features of a robe of honour:

The highest ranking military leaders get an upper coat (*fawqānī*) produced of red atlas silk, embroidered with brocade (*zarkash*) and with a collar of squirrel fur (*sinjāb*).⁷¹

In addition to this obviously eye-catching coat, headgear, bracelets, and shawls are given to the honoured person, e.g. “an exquisite scarf (*shāsh*) that is wrapped around him and that is of white silk on both sides—the honorific names of the Sultan appear on these two sides [...]”⁷² The most valuable robes are decorated with pearls and/or gold threads.⁷³ According to the descriptions in the metatexts, textiles were more splendid than the surviving artefacts suggest, which may be due to their overall fragility.⁷⁴ However, examples of robes from the Mamluk era complement knowledge derived from textual sources. A large fragment (36 × 144.5 cm) of *ṭirāz* from Egypt dated to the 14th century is made of fine linen woven with paired linen indigo wefts simulating embroidery. The inscription repeats and mirrors the term “dominion” (*al-mulk*). The second band of decoration consists of geometric decoration.⁷⁵ Another *ṭirāz* fragment, also from 14th-century Egypt, is produced from double-weft silk and

⁷⁰ Though literacy rates during the Mamluk period are assumed to have been relatively high, see Hirschler 2012, 11–31.

⁷¹ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52.

⁷² Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52.

⁷³ Al-Qalqashandī 1913–1916, IV, 52–53.

⁷⁴ See Walker 2000.

⁷⁵ Galloway 2011, 6.

bears the repeated inscription “Glory to our master the Sultan al-Malik al-Muʿayyad”. This probably refers to the Rasulid Sultan al-Muʿayyad Daʿūd ibn Yūsuf (r. 1297–1321), who reigned in Yemen, indicating that this is one of the many objects manufactured in Egypt for the Yemeni Sultans, either as diplomatic gifts or special commissions. Several other fragments of this textile survive, and their shapes suggest that they once formed a coat.⁷⁶ A fragment of Egyptian silk damask from the early 14th century bears the inscriptions “Glory to our master”, “the Sultan the king”, “al-Nāṣir”, “the suppressor of Heresy”, “Muhammad b. Qalāwūn” (r. 1293–1341). While most Mamluk textile patterns have a strong symmetrical quality, this example belongs to a group featuring more fluid, asymmetrical designs, perhaps influenced by Chinese Yuan silk imports.⁷⁷

In general, the inscriptions on the textiles described here are rather formulaic in content and stylistically heterogeneous—a point which might have facilitated the application of the robes for communicative purposes. Thus, textiles were a highly effective means of communication. Inscriptions on textiles in turn did not necessarily have to be legible. The above-mentioned fake *ṭirāz*, as well as the mirror-reverse-example, further corroborate this assumption. Although a phenomenon of the “middle classes”, fake *ṭirāz* can help us understand the iconicity of texts on textiles: obviously the actual content of the inscription was not its most important feature—the very fact that the textile bore inscriptions at all mattered more. It is not known whether the bourgeois imitation of courtly robing practices transformed the original model. In any case, the textual sources do not discuss the content of the inscriptions at great length—apart from the occasional mention of the “honorific names” of the powerful (see above), the authors seem to assume that their potential audience was aware of the limited repertoire of textual standards.

6 Conclusion

Textiles were a powerful means of communication. Due to their portability and stylistic flexibility, they could be used to convey a broad range of diverse messages. As so-called “robes of honour”, they were embedded in complex patterns of gift exchange and public visual strategies. By the textile, alliances and loyalties were formed and strengthened (or weakened at times). Most of the textiles involved were inscribed, usually with the names of rulers. As inscriptions and words on textiles were usually formulaic and did not go beyond a certain repertoire, they may have been meant to be read, but the comprehension of their semantic meaning was not necessary in order to

⁷⁶ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund (1931).

⁷⁷ Baker 1995, 66.

grasp their symbolic communicative potential as corroborating factors of social hierarchies. These textiles were on constant display, as they were worn by their owners. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the inscriptions were actually read by potential beholders. It was thus a way to communicate to all members of society, whether literate or illiterate.

The case of Ḥasanak, mentioned at the beginning of the article, suggests that in 11th-century historiography the behavioural code connected to the acceptance of a robe already seemed to be obvious. It was transmitted by several historiographical sources that might have had their own intentions in describing Ḥasanak as a traitor. In any case, we have to admit that in the minds of these writers, the acceptance of a robe by an authority who was perceived as hostile to one's own ideological precepts was a highly controversial action. Moreover, this act of disloyalty must have been understood by the possible recipients of these reports as symbolic—otherwise the story would probably not have been included in historical sources from the 11th through the 13th centuries AD. Thus, the communicative potential of textiles was understood by a variety of sources. With regard to my initial questions, it is highly likely that it was the *knowledge about* the inscriptions on the textiles, and not necessarily the inscriptions *per se*, as well as the prominent act of investiture, that were commonly and globally understood as symbolic actions in connection with a valuable commodity that formed—in addition to other factors of course—the glue of the highly complex medieval Islamic societies.

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Rebecca Sauer

Postscript

When I first tried to approach the question of literacy and materiality, I was convinced that there was a strong sense of the “appropriateness” of a given materialization of a message in each society. I still think that there is such a sense—however, the examples of this volume show that behavioural codes related to the materialization of a given message are not so often questioned *in principle* by actors involved in a specific act of communication. Rather, these codes are understood and put into practice unconsciously by almost everybody. So it would seem to miss the point to compare practices depicted in this volume to a near-contemporary episode such as the one I mentioned during the workshop on communication and materiality that took place in October 2012: earlier that year, there had been a debate (mostly online) on whether certain computer fonts should be banned from being applied in scientific contexts. This happened in the aftermath of a presentation by scientists at the famous CERN laboratory in Switzerland, who had used the font “comic sans” on their power point slides for announcing the discovery of the so-called “Higgs boson”. The font, that was fiercely criticised, was originally designed for a user manual to introduce those completely unfamiliar with using a computer (such as children) to the technique on a very basic level. Hence, the critics of comic sans denounced it as being good for children only, i.e. not really being sophisticated or to be taken seriously. According to this perception, using comic sans has been described as “being equal to turning up to a black-tie event in a clown costume”. In the light of these then-recent developments, it seemed useful to ask about the appropriateness of certain materializations in specific contexts. As for the “typographic era”, similar questions had been raised by scholars such as Gutjahr and Benton, who were interested in “the relationship between a text’s typography and its literary interpretation”¹.

However, as this volume has shown, human actions related to texts in pre-modern, largely illiterate societies have to be approached from a different angle—as the precise content and material implementation of a given message were seldom the only relevant aspects (as far as the examples presented have illustrated) for the recipients. There were thus two core questions raised in the introductory part of this volume. The first was how communication worked in mostly illiterate societies—and how it was conceptualized by a given regime. The second was about the ways in which the (im)materiality of a given message affected the communicative process between senders and/or addressees. As the contributions to this volume on “Communication and Materiality” (not to be mistaken for a volume entitled “Materialities of Communication” from the 1990s, co-edited by the German literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht) are

1 Gutjahr/Benton 2001, 3–4.

from a diverse range of regions and historical periods, analysing a variety of communicative milieus (from sacral spaces to more “profane” areas such as “gossiping” milieus), the answers tend to stress diverging points. Nevertheless, there are several aspects that are common to every single one of these contributions. Here I would like to highlight some of the “golden threads” that seemed striking to me.

One of the two overall results of the volume is that all of the societies depicted tend to communicate through the “material”. Material artefacts such as inscriptions on buildings and other monuments or portable objects (textiles, eye-catching documents, carefully arranged tablets) become carriers of “meaning”, going beyond the writing they may contain. This implies that the dichotomy between text and image is constantly negotiated—texts are not necessarily to be understood by way of their semantic cores, but rather as material contexts for very specific messages. The carriers of meaning are part of behavioural codes that are usually understood by the individual groups that interact within these societies. Besides the significance of communication through the material, the societies depicted here often communicate through the “immaterial”, i.e. the spoken word plays a major role in including wider parts of a given population in the “streams of communication”. The material and the immaterial are thus two sides of the same medal, rather than opposites. However, each of the contributors to this volume assesses the extent and the relevance of literacy quite differently.

Christina Tsouparopoulou has shown that the material and immaterial spheres of communication represent intermingling streams of information. Communication in ancient Mesopotamia should be understood as a system with manifold aspects, not merely as a “top-down”-strategy of rulers. Even random objects can “play a part in this information flow”—a statement that reminds us of Bruno Latour’s notion of actor-network-theory (ANT). Literacy thus does not seem to be a category that excludes certain groups from communicative action. Similar results can be discovered when it comes to the analysis of Linear B tablets (Angeliki Karagianni). Although confined to a very limited administrative sphere and applied primarily for mnemonic recording only, the communicative potential of Linear B script was exploited on the highest level. Thus, the tablets discussed can be described both as medium and message in a primarily oral environment—which implies that a more or less fixed system can become a starting point for multifaceted material practices. However, as Lisa Wilhelmi has shown, materialities could alter under certain circumstances (in this case the materiality of Neo-Assyrian divinatory communications)—and so did the influence of individual soothsayers at the royal court. Douglas Fear in turn highlights that the “meaning”, intelligibility and significance of a certain writing system depends on the context of application. Despite the fact that Dareios chose a remarkable monumental materialization of his kingly message, Old Persian cuneiform remained a script confined to a very specific context. For many centuries, illiteracy in Old Persian cuneiform was to prevail.

Illiteracy in medieval Europe did not prevent insurgent groups from communicating with the powerful (who were often illiterate themselves), as Christoph Mauntel suggests. Instead, there was a so-called “language of action”, which relied on visibility, symbolism and materiality and was understood by most of the actors in society. Authorities and subjects alike used to rely on the same code of communication for their differing purposes. In this framework, literacy does go beyond reading abilities: the capability of interpreting the materiality of an object becomes important too, if not more important than the understanding of the words *per se*.

A very similar result can be stated with regard to the “textile performance of the written word” in medieval Islamic societies (Rebecca Sauer): the comprehension of their semantic meaning was not necessary in order to grasp their symbolic communicative potential as corroborating factors of social hierarchies. Rather, it was the knowledge about the inscriptions that mattered, and which provoked actions and re-actions.

When looking at the results outlined above, the question of literacy in these pre-modern (yet heterogeneous) contexts seems to be somewhat anachronistic. Meaning used to be constructed beyond the realm of semantic intelligibility—in fact, the oral and the material were both strong constituents of communicative processes.

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